著＝十文字 青　イラスト＝白井鋭利

灰と幻想のグリムガル

level.1 ― ささやき、詠唱、祈り、目覚めよ

Presented by Ao jyumonji Illustration by Eiri shirai

Table of Contents

Grimgal of Ashes and Illusion
COLOR ILLUSTRATIONS
Chapter 0
Chapter 1: Without Knowing Anything
Chapter 2: Lost and Out of Options
Chapter 3: Yorozu
Chapter 4: Enjoying Life in a Guild
Chapter 5 – Rendezvous
Chapter 6: +1/-1 Warrior
Chapter 7: Slow Start
Chapter 8: Persistence
Chapter 9: Heavy Resolution
Chapter 10: Damroww
Chapter 11: Don’t Go
Chapter 12: Where to Turn Now?
Chapter 13: Crucial Piece
Chapter 14: Silver’s Gold Coin
Chapter 15: Apologies
Chapter 16: Aiming for the Top
Chapter 17: To Hold Dear
Chapter 18: Her Reasons
Chapter 19: Ad Interim, Tomorrow
Chapter 20: Not-Quite-Glories of the Goblin Slayers
Chapter 21: The Fine Line Between Innocence
Chapter 22: Our Offering to You
Chapter 23: Prologue
Author’s Afterword
APPENDIX

Grimgal of Ashes and Illusion

LEVEL 1 : A Whisper, an Aria, a Prayer, an Awakening

By: Ao Jyumonji (illus. Eiri Shirai)

Translate by: Grimgal The Translation

Epub by: Henkanepubs

COLOR ILLUSTRATIONS

"Shihoru, they're so big..."
"Wha? What are?"
"Your BOOBS.
So big... and so adorably round..."

"Just a little more! I'll prove to you that we haven't come this far for nothing!"

Chapter 0

“Awaken.”

It was as if he could hear someone calling to him, and the boy opened his eyes.

It was dark. Nighttime maybe? But it wasn’t pitch black; there was light. A flame—above his head. A flame had been lit. A candle. Not just one candle, but a series of small candles spaced in even intervals in a line along the wall that seemed to stretch on forever. Where was this?

It was hard to breathe for some reason. He touched the wall and found it hard and rough. It wasn’t a wall really, it was rock and, like what one would expect from sleeping on rocks, his back and bottom were sore. Maybe he was in a cave? It sure felt like it. *A cave?*Why was he in a cave?

The candles had been placed fairly high above him, but if he stood up and stretched out his hands, he probably would have been able to reach them. However, it was dark enough that he could only see an arm’s length in front of him and almost nothing beneath his feet.

He could sense other presences there with him. If he listened carefully, he could hear the faint sound of breathing. Other people? What would he do if it were something else? He didn’t know but it would be terrible. But in a way, the sound seemed to be that of other people.

“Is there someone else here?” he called out, tentatively and a bit fearfully.

“Yeah.” The reply came immediately. A male voice.

“I’m here,” another voice, female, answered.

“Um,” another male voice said in response.

“I thought so,” someone else said.

“How many are here?”

“Why don’t you try counting?”

“More importantly, where’s here?”

“Who knows…”

“Does no one here know?”

“What the hell is this.”

He was confused. What was this? Why was he here? *Why?* How long had he been here already?

The boy clutched tightly at his chest as if he were trying to tear something out. He didn’t know. How long had he been here, why was he here? When he thought about it, it seemed like some part of his brain was close to grasping the answer, but it would quickly vanish before he could catch hold of it. He didn’t know. It irritated him. He didn’t know anything.

“Can’t just sit here forever,” someone said. A male voice, husky and low.

He could hear the sound of pebbles being ground underfoot. It seemed like the speaker had stood up.

“Where are you going?” a female voice asked.

“Going to try following the candles down this wall,” he replied, completely matter-of-factly.

Wasn’t the guy afraid? Why wasn’t he more upset? The man, standing two candles’ distance away, was quite tall. He could see a little of the man’s head, illuminated by the candlelight. His hair wasn’t black—it was silver.

“I’m going too,” one of the girls stated.

“I guess I’m going too,” another person said. A male’s voice.

“H-hold on! Then so will I!” Another boy said.

“There’s also a path the opposite way,” someone else said. The voice was a little highly pitched, but probably a guy. “No candles though.”

“If you want to go that way, no one’s stopping you,” the silver haired boy said dismissively, walking on.

It seemed like everyone was following the silver haired guy. If so, the boy should too. He had no desire to be left behind alone and hurriedly got to his feet. He walked along stiffly, one hand feeling along the stone wall. The ground wasn’t smooth, but somewhat uneven, though it was still relatively easy to traverse.

There were people in front of and behind him, but he had no idea who they were. From their voices though, he was guessing that everyone was rather young. *Even if it’s just a person or two, maybe there’s someone here I know…* he thought.

Someone he knew? An acquaintance? A friend? Odd. No one came to mind. No, that wasn’t it. More accurately, it was as if the faces connected with the words ‘acquaintance’ or ‘friend’ were just about to surface in his mind, but vanished before he could grab hold of them. He didn’t know. It wasn’t just his friends, but even his family. It didn’t feel as if that the memories were lost to him. It felt more as if they slipped his mind when he should have been able to remember them.

“…Maybe it’s better just to not think about it,” the boy said to no one in particular.

A reply came from someone behind him. Definitely a young girl’s voice. “Not think about what?”

“No, nothing. Nothing really. It’s…”

Nothing? Really? Was it really nothing? What was “it”?

The boy shook his head. At some point, they seemed to have stopped moving. Keep walking. They needed to keep walking. It was better not to think about anything. He got the feeling that the more he tried to remember, the more he would come to forget.

The row of candles continued. When they would end, he did not know. How far had they walked? Probably a good distance. Maybe not far at all. He couldn’t tell. He had lost all sense of time and extent.

“There’s something here,” someone ahead of him said. “It’s bright. A lamp?”

“It’s gated,” Silver-Hair said, to which someone else replied, “Maybe it’s the way out!”

Instantly the boy’s feet felt lighter. Even though he couldn’t see anything, he had a feeling they were going the right way. Everyone’s pace quickened and soon enough they could see it. Brighter than any candle, it was a lantern hanging off the wall. The light it gave off was illuminating something that indeed looked like a gate.

Silver-Hair placed a hand on it and gave it a hard shake. On top of his hair color, he was dressed like some kind of teenage gangster too. “I’m gonna open it,” Silver-Hair stated, and when he gave it a yank, it opened with a creak.

“Whoa!” several people cried at once.

“Can we get out from there?” said a girl, directly behind the guy. Her attire was rather flashy, gaudy even.

Silver-Hair took a few steps forward through the gate. “Stairs. We can go up.”

The stairs led into a narrow, moldy smelling corridor that further led to another stone staircase. There were no candles, but light was filtering in from somewhere above. Everyone formed a line and ascended one step at a time. At the top there was another gate, but this time it wouldn’t budge.

Silver-Hair banged on it several times with a fist. “Anyone there? Open the gate!” he bellowed. He sounded quite angry.

The Gaudy-Girl behind him joined in, shouting at the top of her lungs. “Is anyone there?! Open the gate!”

“Hey! Open the gate!” The person behind them, a boy with short, messy hair, shouted as well.

Something happened shortly after. Silver-Hair took his hand off the gate and backed away slightly. It looked like someone had come. Gaudy-Girl and Messy-Hair had also fallen silent. The sound of tumblers falling into place could be

heard, and the door opened.

“Get out,” someone said. Somehow, the boy knew it belonged to the man who had unlocked the gate.

The stairs led into a room built with stone. There were no windows, but lamps kept the room brightly lit. Along with the stairs that had led up here, there was another set of stairs that went to another floor. The room itself had an overall primitive appearance and smelled of must; it didn’t look like anything out of the present day and age. The man who had opened the gate was dressed strangely as well. And by strangely, it meant that the things covering the entirety of the man’s body weren’t clothing. They were made of metal and… Was that actually… armor?

And the thing that was covering the man’s head… the boy really wanted to call it a war helm. The object hanging at the man’s waist, it wasn’t a stick. Possibly a sword? Armor, helm, and sword. What time and age was this? Or considering everything else, should that have been the least of his worries?

When the armored man pulled on something mounted to the wall, the walls and floor trembled slightly, and a heavy sound reverberated throughout the room. A portion of the wall moved, opening up slowly. The stone of it sunk away and a rectangular hole appeared in its place.

“Get out,” the armored man said once more, thrusting his chin towards the other side of the opening.

Silver-Hair went first, followed by Gaudy-Girl. Everyone else followed in succession, as if being pulled along, stepping outside. OUTSIDE. This time, they really were outside. Was it dusk or dawn? The dimly sky stretched on endlessly in all directions. They stood on a moderately high hill, and behind them, a huge tower soared aloft. Was that the building they had been in only moments before? Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that they had been underneath it…

Counting the number of people present, there were eight boys including Silver-Hair, Messy-Hair, and himself, and four girls including Gaudy-Girl for a total of twelve in all. It was still dark so he couldn’t quite make out everyone’s features, but build, clothes, hair styles, and general facial features were visible. The boy didn’t recognize a single person here.

“That looks like a city,” someone said. He had silky hair and a slender physique. He was pointing to something beyond the hill.

Looking in that direction, the boy could see buildings clustered closely together. A city. It certainly looked like one, at least. It had to be a city. Surrounding it was a tall fence—no, not a fence. A towering, sturdy looking wall.

“It looks more like a castle than a city,” a skinny boy wearing black framed glasses said.

“A castle,” the boy whispered to himself. Why did his voice sound like it was not his own?

“So… where is this?” a petite, shy seeming girl directly behind him inquired, nervously.

“No use asking me, dunno,” the boy replied.

“Ah, sorry. Does anyone know? Where are we?”

No one knew anything. Unless everyone was conspiring to give Shy-Petite Girl trouble or was hiding the information for some reason, no one had the slightest idea.

“Seriously?” Messy-Hair said, sifting his hands through it.

“Ah!” said another boy wearing a striped jersey, as he clapped his hands together. He had a sort of happy-go-lucky air about him. “Why don’t we ask him, the armored guy that was standing guard?”

Everyone turned their attention to the door. It was then they all noticed. The doorway was getting narrower and narrower. Stone was rising from the ground, sealing the opening off bit by bit.

“Hold on a—” The Happy-Go-Lucky boy rushed over to it in a panic but didn’t make it in time. The doorway disappeared and it was now impossible to tell it apart from the rest of the wall. “Hold on, how’s that possible? Whoever’s doing this, just quit it already…” he said, brushing his hands over the wall’s surface, banging on it with both fists. Nothing happened.

Soon, he gave up and slumped to the ground.

“This can’t be good,” a girl with long hair tied into twin braids said. She pronounced her words slightly off, with the accent on the wrong syllables.

“Is this for real?” Messy-Hair was squatted down, head between his knees. “Seriously? Seriously…?”

“And, there they are, perfectly on time!” A girl’s shrill voice echoed around them.

Who was that? There were four girls. Gaudy-Girl, Twin-Braided Girl, Shy-Petite Girl, and finally a girl even smaller than her, probably less than 4’9”. The shrill female voice didn’t seem to belong to the Gaudy-Girl, Twin-Braided Girl, or the Shy-Petite Girl. It probably wasn’t Super-Small Girl’s voice either.

“Everyone appeared, huh, came to visit, huh. Where, you say? Here, I say!”

“Where?!” Happy-Go-Lucky shouted, jumping to his feet.

“Doooon’t rush, doooon’t shout, doooon’t let your hair down, doooon’t pull your hair out!” For some reason the voice seemed to be coming from behind the tower. “Cha-lalalalalaaan, cha-lalalalalaaan, lalan…” Humming a tune, another girl poked her head out from the side of the tower. Her hair was tied into bunches, in a kind of country-girl fashion.

“Hello. How are you. Welcome to Grimgal. I’m Hiyomu, please allow me to be your guide. Pleased to meet you. Nice to meet you too? Kyapeeeee—”

“The way she talks pisses me off,” a boy with a buzz cut said, his jaws clenched so hard his teeth ground together.

“Wah!” Hiyomu shrank back for a second then popped her head out again. “Very scary. Very frightening. Please don’t be thaaaaaaaat mad. Okay? Okay? Okay? Okay?”

Buzz-Cut boy clicked his tongue at her. “Then don’t piss me off!”

“Unnnnnderstooooooood—!” Hiyomu leapt out from under the tower and curtsied in front of everyone. “Hiyomu will mind her manners from now on! Carefully

mind her manners! Is this okay? This is okay? Kyoheee—!”

“You’re doing that on purpose!”

“Oops, they figured it out! Whoops, oops, please don’t get mad, please don’t hit, please don’t kick, Hiyomu doesn’t like pain, in general she wants to be treated kiiiiiiiiiiiiindly. So, can I go on with the conversation? Can I do my job?”

“Hurry up and get on with it,” Silver-Hair said in a low voice. Unlike Buzz-Cut boy, he didn’t look obviously angry; however, the sound of his voice was rather threatening.

“Well then.” Hiyomu smiled broadly. “I’ll get on with my job, okay?”

The sky was getting brighter with every passing moment and it was already much brighter than just moments before. It wasn’t dusk; it was morning. The night was turning into dawn.

“For now, pleeeeeeeeease come with me. Or I’ll leave you behind—”

Hiyomu’s ponytails swung from side to side as she walked towards them. A road led from the tower to the bottom of the hill. To either side of the well-trodden black dirt road were clumps of grass, and in the grasslands around the hill, a great number of large white rocks lay strewn on the ground. Their quantity was excessive and they looked like they were organized into some sort of pattern, like someone had purposely placed them there.

“Hey, are those…” Messy-Hair pointed to the rocks. “Would those happen to be gravestones?”

The boy shuddered. Now that Messy-Hair had mentioned it, it did seem that there were letters carved into the stones. Some stones even had flowers placed in front of them. Graves. Could this entire hill be a cemetery?

Hiyomu, making her way to the front of the group, didn’t bother to turn around to look at him. “Hehehehe,” she giggled. “Maybe. Who knows. But no worries now, no need to worry now. It’s not anyone here’s time yet. It’s great that it’s not anyone’s time yet, right? Ehehehehe…”

Buzz-Cut boy clicked his tongue at her again and kicked at the ground. He

looked pretty angry, but seemed to intend to follow Hiyomu wherever she was leading them. Silver-Hair was already following behind her and Glasses-Boy, Gaudy-Girl, and Super-Small Girl were following.

Happy-Go-Lucky shouted, “Oy! Oy! Me too, me too! Me too!” And began chasing after Silver-Hair, only to trip and fall.

It didn’t look like there was any other option but to follow, but where was Hiyomu intending to take them? Where was this? The boy sighed and turned his gaze towards the sky. “Wha—” He squeaked.

What was that?

It was hanging pretty low in the sky but it couldn’t have been the sun. It was too big to be a star and besides, it had already begun to wane. The shape was something between a half-moon and a crescent moon. Speaking of which, maybe it was the moon. But if it were, that would be strange too…

“…It’s crimson.”

The boy blinked several times and looked again. No matter how many times he looked, it was the hue of red ruby. Behind him, Shy-Petite Girl gasped. He looked back and saw that she was gazing at the moon as well.

“Wha—” Twin-Braided Girl seemed to have noticed too. She forced herself to blink a few times then chuckled softly. “O moon-sama, you’re so crimson red~yan. So very beautiful.”

The silky-haired boy looked up at the crimson moon hanging in the dawn sky and his expression turned to one of amazement.

“Whoa,” Messy-Hair said with a wide-eyed stare.

An excessively large but seemingly mild-mannered boy grunted in a low tone out of admiration.

The boy didn’t know where this was, where he was from, or how he got here. He couldn’t recall anything related to that. But there was only one thing that he was absolutely certain of. Where he was from, the moon wasn’t crimson. A place that was not here.

A moon that was crimson was… unearthly.

Chapter 1: Without Knowing Anything

There were areas where buildings made of stone lined the streets and there were areas filled with nothing but wooden ones. The cobblestone street was full of so many twists and turns that it was difficult to see where it led. Muddy water flowed down narrow waterways along both sides of the broad road, but not in any great amount. Now and then, a stench that might have been human waste filled their noses, but after a while of walking no one seemed to notice it anymore.

Hiyomu led the group of twelve into the city that had been visible at the top of the hill. According to her, the town was called Altana. The group passed a large number of what appeared to be the residents, as might be expected in a city, even though it was still quite early in the morning. The townsfolk stared at the newcomers as if they were exotic animals. But the opposite was also true, just because the townsfolk were all dressed so strangely. Their clothing was much simpler, with no decorations, and rather shabby compared to their own.

“Is this place…” Happy-Go-Lucky began. “I mean, is this place like some foreign country?”

“Ahh…” Messy-Hair tilted his head to one side as if that answered everything. “A foreign country. Country? Hold on, which country am I from? Weird, I don’t remember. I don’t know my address either… Why?”

“You haven’t noticed yet?” Silver-Hair said in a low tone. “I can’t remember anything but my name either.”

Something about the way everyone phrased it bothered the boy. *Can’t remember.* The connotation was different than if it was simply something they had forgotten. Maybe like himself, when Silver-Hair tried to recall certain memories, they also disappeared before he could fully grab hold of them.

“Name?” Messy-Hair thumped his chest. “My name’s Ranta… But errr, I don’t remember anything else. My memories are gone? Seriously?” His tone came

across as something the wise guy would say in a two-man comedy routine.

“Putting it that way…” And the boy felt himself beginning to playact the straight man. It had been unintentional, and he regretted it a little, but he couldn’t stop now. “Sounds like maybe you’ve got amnesia… or something… probably…”

“Hey.” Ranta sighed. “If you’re gonna play the straight man, do it with more—you know. Say your line with more confidence. Doing it in a half-assed way makes my retard act look weak and no one’s laughing either. Whatever, I’ll forgive you this time. And your name’s?”

“You’ll…‘forgive’ me?” And Ranta was calling him a retard? Ranta’s the one who sounded even more retarded, saying weird things like that. He didn’t want to leave it just at that but… name. What was his name? “My name’s… Haruhiro. I think.”

Messy-Hair, Ranta, toppled himself over in an exaggerated fashion. “You think? Don’t tell me you don’t even know your own name! We just went over this, right? This whole conversation’s about remembering nothing but our names, remember?”

This kid. This kid was exceedingly annoying, Haruhiro thought, eyeing Silver-Hair as he walked behind Hiyomu. What was the silver haired guy’s name? He wanted to know but was too afraid to ask. Haruhiro was not looking to avoid asking Silver-Hair on purpose, but still he instead asked about the silky haired boy next to him. “What about you?”

Silky-Hair gave Haruhiro a smile. He seemed like an extremely composed, cool-headed person. “I’m Manato. Can I call you Haruhiro? No need be too formal right?”

“Oh. Yeah, sure, that’s fine. Can I call you by first name only too then?”

“Sure, I don’t mind at all.”

Manato grinned and Haruhiro returned it without thinking. Outwardly Manato seemed like a good guy, a trustworthy person. Meanwhile the brat’s name was Ranta. As for Silver-Hair, he was too afraid to ask and Buzz-Cut Boy had a rather unfriendly demeanor. Haruhiro got the impression that Gaudy-Girl was from a completely different world and even though Glasses-Boy looked

approachable enough, he found him hard to actually ask for some reason.

What about Twin-Braided Girl, Shy-Petite Girl, and Super-Small Girl? Shy-Petite Girl was nearest to him and he had been wanting to strike up a conversation with her for a while now. For starters, maybe he should try asking her name. But when Haruhiro opened his mouth to ask, he began to get a little nervous.

He gave a short cough. “Excuse me.”

“…Ye—yes…?”

“It’s uh, it’s nothing really but, um, not that it’s important and I don’t mean to pry or anything—”

“The name’s Kikkawa!!” Happy-Go-Lucky loudly cut in, striking a queer pose. “Forget about the boys though, let’s start with the girls! How about getting to know each other, right now, all in one go?”

Twin-Braided Girl tilted her head to the side. “Or how about no.”

“Awww…” Happy-Go-Lucky, Kikkawa, was pathetically shot down in one blow.

Haruhiro thought it kind of served him right, but thanks to that he also regained a little of his own composure. “Erm, what’s your name?” he asked Shy-Petite Girl, doing his best to make the question as direct and short as possible. “I mean, it’d be easier to talk with you if I knew. Well, easier than not knowing.”

“Umm…” Shy-Petite Girl’s gaze dropped and she tugged rather forcefully on her bangs, as if she were doing her best to hide her face behind her hair.

Her features were all rather modest but there was something considerably cute about her face. There was definitely nothing to hide.

“My… My name is Shihoru. My first name. Probably. Sorry…”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

“I’m sorry, it’s a bad habit. Sorry, I’ll be more careful.”

Shihoru was trembling like a newborn baby deer. Was she really going to be okay? Haruhiro couldn't help but be worried; she was the sort that he instinctively wanted to protect.

"You're pretty tall," Haruhiro said to a seemingly mild-mannered but giant of a guy. "How tall are you?"

The giant blinked, his expression rather vacant. "Height? 5'9"."

"Five-nine!?" Ranta cut in. "You mean that makes my over 5'6" officially short?!"

"No, that's not right…" the giant said. "I think it's something like 6'1", maybe. Oh. My name's Mogzo. Probably."

"Give me 5 inches right now, Mogzo!" Ranta demanded impossibly, poking him. "If I get 5 inches from you, I'll be 5'11" and you'll be 5'8" and our places would be switched! Awesome, right?"

"I would if I could…"

Haruhiro didn't have anyone to blame but himself for having his conversation taken over again by Ranta. "You're not over 5'6", you're only 5'5"."

"Shut up! And that's bad how? Judging by looks, you're the same as me!"

"I'm just under 5'6" though."

"You're such an ass! A jackass that discriminates against people because of one little inch!"

"You are seriously one bratty little kid."

"Did you say something? I couldn't hear you. What did you say?"

"Nothing. I didn't say anything."

"Liar! You just called me a lying perverted fiendish bastard, didn't you! You can't fool my devilishly good ears! I heard what you said! You said, 'Go to hell, curly haired bastard!'"

“I seriously didn’t say anything like that.”

“And you called me curly! No one’s allowed to call me that! The very word is banned!”

“I told you, I didn’t call you that. Don’t put words in other people’s mouths.”

“I heard you! These devil’s ears hear too much! I listen so much my ears get talked off! Whatever. For now, just remember this! I’ll never forgive anyone who goes so far as calling me curly! It’s the death penalty for anyone who does. Death!”

“Curly,” Silver-Hair said, turning around. “You’re making a scene. Shut it.”

“Yes sir.” Curly Ranta seemed to shrink. “I apologize. I will now stop talking.”

“I thought you said you wouldn’t forgive anyone who called you that,” Haruhiro said with a shrug.

“Idiot,” Ranta said in a whisper. “I’m a man who chooses his time and place. They call me the Choice-Master. I’ll become King of Decision!”

“Yeah, okay. Become whatever you want, King of Derision.”

“Not King of Derision, King of Decision! When I’m king, I’ll show you…”

“Curly.” Silver-Hair stopped and turned to look back at Ranta again. “Shut up.”

Ranta immediately went to his knees and bowed. “I beg your forgiveness!”

“Instead of the Decision King,” Haruhiro said, gazing down at Ranta, “why don’t you aim to become the Prostration King?”

“Prostration King?! No way! No matter how good I’m with prostrating myself, that’s just too uncool!”

“*Curly*.” Silver-Hair’s tone now had a dark edge to it. “This is the third time.”

Ranta again went to his knees, bowing so low his forehead touched the cobblestone road. “I–I’m super ultra sorry! Please forgive me. Pleeeeeease…”

This guy's already the King of Prostration, Haruhiro thought, but kept it to himself. If he said anything, Ranta was going to have a retort at the ready and the conversation would never end. They walked on in silence until Hiyomu brought them to a halt in front of a two-storied stone building.

Raised above the building was a flag with a red crescent moon on a white field, and the same symbol appeared on a signboard. 'Alt front my serve for son on' was written there, but something didn't look right. Upon a closer glance, he noticed that parts of the words were faded and some of the letters had fallen off.

"Tada!" Hiyomu pointed to the sign. "We've finally arrived! This is that famous place! Altana Frontier Army's Reserve Force, Crimson Moon's Headquarters."

"Crimson Moon," Haruhiro breathed, looking at the sign once more. Indeed if the missing letters were added back in, it read: Altana Frontier Army Reserve Force Crimson Moon.

"Let's go on in!" Prompted by Hiyomu, they entered the building to find that the inside looked much like a pub. The room was spacious, equipped with tables and chairs, and there was a serving counter at the back. Behind the counter stood a man with his arms crossed in front of his chest. No one else was present.

"This is where Hiyomu leaves you!" Hiyomu bowed to the man behind the counter. "Bri-chan, would you be kind enough to explain to them the details so on and so forth like usual?"

"Right," the man called Bri replied simply, waving Hiyomu off with a hand, his belly flopping with the waving motion.

"Then if you'll excuse me, bye-bye!"

The tension in the room seemed to increase after the door swung shut behind Hiyomu. Perhaps it was due to the way Bri was looking at them, as if conducting an inspection. No, not 'perhaps.' It was definitely because of Bri. He was odd. Very odd.

Bri leaned forward, placed his elbows on the counter, and rested his chin atop folded fingers. Haruhiro noticed he had a cleft chin. Enough about that though, it was his hair color. Green. And that maybe he had lipstick on, but the color of his lips were black. That he had long, bushy eyebrows encircling blue eyes… a

gorgeous sky-blue, which made them remarkably frightening. That his face was covered very heavily with makeup and his cheekbones were highlighted with bright red blush.

But no matter how Haruhiro looked at him, he was definitely a man.

“Hmm… very good,” Bri said, nodding. He straightened and continued, “Welcome, young kittens. My name’s Brittany. I’m the commanding officer, or ‘boss’ if you will, of Altana Frontier Army’s Reserve Force, Crimson Moon. You can call me ‘commander’ or Bri-chan. Whichever you use, make sure you use it affectionately, like a child to his mother. Got it?”

“Commander.” Silver-Hair strode up to the counter and tilting his head to one side, demanded, “Answer me. I got that this place is called Altana. What’s the Frontier Army? What’s the Reserve Force? Why am I here? You know, don’t you?”

“You’ve got spunk!” Bri remarked pleasantly, laughing. “I like kids like you. What’s your name?”

“Renji. I don’t like homos like you.”

“Is that so?”

What happened next, Haruhiro didn’t quite catch. Bri’s movements were not only fast, they were smooth as butter and almost casual.

“Renji. Let me give you some advice,” Bri had said, eyes narrowing to slits. But by the time Haruhiro realized what had transpired, Bri was holding the tip of a knife right under Renji’s chin. “No one who’s called me a homo has ever lived long afterwards. You seem like a smart kid, so you should understand what I’m saying. Want to keep pushing me?”

“Really?” Renji replied. Haruhiro gasped as Renji grabbed the knife with a bare hand. He was gripping it firmly enough in his fisted palm to keep it fixed in place; blood was running profusely from where the edge cut into the flesh below his thumb. “I never had any intention of living a long life anyway and it’s not in my nature to back down to threats. If you intend to kill me, then kill me, Commander Homo.”

“Eventually…” Bri licked his black painted lips and stroked Renji’s cheek. “I’ll do you perfectly. Again and again. In a way you’ll never forget.”

“You know,” Ranta whispered to Haruhiro, “when he says ‘do’ he probably means a different ‘do’ than the usual do. Mostly likely.”

“How exactly is he going to ‘do’ him?” Twin-Braided Girl asked Ranta, expression confused.

“Err, that’s uh, I mean… He’s gonna put ‘it’ in where it’s not originally supposed to be put in. You know, the place where it usually comes out. You know what I mean? Right, Haruhiro?”

“Don’t get me involved. You started this conversation, you take full responsibility.”

“That’s cold. Are you anti-social or something? Your people skills are lower than absolute zero.”

“Hey, hey.” Happy-Go-Lucky Kikkawa inserted himself between Renji and Bri. “Didn’t you two just meet? There’s no *point* in fighting over a misunderstanding. Let’s just forgive and forget! Be happy and get along, okay? Okay? For my sake!”

“For your sake?” Renji scoffed, glaring at him. But nevertheless, he let go of the knife.

Bri also withdrew the knife, wiping off the bloodied blade with a cloth. “There always seem to be a few reckless ones in every group. Eight boys, four girls. A little short on girls, but I like it that way better anyway. Boys tend to be better at fighting, so no problem.”

Manato’s eyebrows narrowed. “Fighting?”

“You heard me,” Bri chuckled softly. Actually, the sound kind of grossed Haruhiro out. “Fighting.”

“This place is the reserve force’s headquarters so…” Manato glanced downwards. “We’re volunteer soldiers?”

“Very good!” Bri applauded slowly. “You show promise too. Precisely right. You can all become volunteer soldiers. Though you do have the choice to decline.”

“Choice-Master,” said Haruhiro, patting Ranta on the back. “Looks like you’re up.”

“Oh? Ah! Right! That’s right! I’m… up?”

“You all can choose,” said Bri, flicking his index finger lightly at them. “Take my offer or leave it. And my offer is this: Enlist as a member of Altana Frontier Army’s Reserve Force, Crimson Moon. Well, to start you’ll be trainees, meaning you’ll be learning how to become self-sufficient soldiers.”

“Just what,” Gaudy-Girl asked, her expression frightened, “do members of the reserve force do?”

“Fight, of course.” Bri flicked a hand in annoyance, as if reluctant to explain. “Here on the frontier, we humans clash with the other races, and there are lots, and I mean *lots*, of things we call monsters. The frontier army’s job is to kill those monsters and protect our borders. But to be honest, it’s not an easy job. The frontier army has their hands full just maintaining Altana as a forward base. That’s where we, the reserve force, come in.”

“In other words,” Glasses-Boy said, pushing his glasses up to the bridge of his nose, “while the frontier army stays back and protects this city, the reserve force goes out to quell their numbers. Am I right?”

“To put it simply…” Bri said, putting his hands together then opening them in an impression of a blossoming flower. He was doing it to look cute, but in reality, it came off as rather disturbing. “Actually, we’re a part of the regular frontier army. Protecting the border isn’t just about defending. Expeditions are sent out to hit our enemies where they lurk. However, these small-scale operations aren’t for something the size of the regular army. Moving such a big force requires planning and preparation of logistics, supply lines, and such. That’s where we’re different.”

Kikkawa nodded enthusiastically, perhaps excessively, at Bri’s every word. “And how’re we different?”

“The reserve force.” Bri folded his hands and twiddled his fingers. “We’re

mobile and adaptable. We scout, infiltrate, hit and run. We weaken the enemy's ability to fight. Even if we were to cooperate with the regular army, we wouldn't employ the same tactics. We're organized in small groups of about 3 to 6 people per group and each group uses their own wits, ability to collect information, and judgment when taking on enemies. This is what we, the reserve force Crimson Moon, do and how we operate."

"And…" Renji flexed the fingers of his right hand. The bleeding seemed to have stopped. "What if we were to refuse your offer to join?"

Bri tilted his head to one side, and then thrust his hips back and forth. Was he trying to be funny or was he making a threat in some comical sort of way? Whatever it was, it was actually rather scary. "Nothing. I said it before, you all can choose. If you choose not to become a member of the reserve force, you can leave here now and never come back."

"In that case, I guess I'll pass," said Ranta. He ran his hands through his disheveled hair. "I still don't know exactly what's going on, but I'm a pacifist by nature."

"I see," Bri said. "Bye then. Take care."

"That's it!?" Ranta, who had been making his way to the door, stopped and turned on his heels. "You're as cold as Haruhiro! But hold on a sec, if I were to leave now, what should I do?"

"I take no responsibility regarding that," Bri laughed. "If you don't want to become a member of Crimson Moon, you're free to go. If you decide to enlist as a trainee, you'll receive ten silvers from me. That's enough to live on for the time being, I think."

"Silvers?" Manato's eyes widened as he searched his pockets for something. "I forgot… money."

Haruhiro searched the front and back pockets of his pants too and pulled his hands out empty. He had no money.

"Part-time job," Ranta groaned, crumpling his face. "Need to find a part-time job. Maybe. Temporarily…"

“Best of luck,” Bri said with an exaggerated shrug. “Other available jobs are way more difficult than volunteer soldier. Even if someone were to hire you, your wages are so low you’ll barely scratch out a living. You’ll also start off as pretty much a slave-boy to your new master.”

“Guh,” Kikkawa smacked himself on the side of his head. “I’m no good at being a slave-boy. I guess there’s no choice but to go the soldier trainee route?”

“I said it already, whether or not you enlist is up to every single one of you,” Bri said, pointing a finger at them all one by one.

Renji heaved a long sigh. “Then tell me, in practical terms, what I have to do.”

“Oh, Renji, you disappoint me. Weren’t you listening? You fight enemies using your own wits, ability to collect information, and judgment. That’s how we operate.”

“So you’re telling me, that we’re supposed to figure out what we’re supposed to do as trainees on our own?”

“In a nutshell,” Bri nodded, placing red colored coin-like objects and small leather pouches in a neat row on the counter, until there were twelve sets total. Bri picked up one of the coin-like objects, which portrayed a crescent moon in relief.

“This will serve as identification, and a symbol that you are a Crimson Moon trainee. This will be the only proof that you are a trainee, so don’t lose it. Well, holding onto it all the time isn’t a good idea either, but anyway, when you have the means to purchase your service contract for twenty silvers then you’ll become a full-fledged Crimson Moon member with all related privileges and distinctions.”

“Wait a minute,” Buzz-Cut Boy said, rebelliously. “You’re making us pay money to enlist as volunteers?”

“Yes. Is there something wrong with that?”

“That’s unacceptable.”

“Would you be able to buy food or clothes or do anything without money? Don’t

complain about something because you have no money. If you don’t like it, then go die in a field somewhere.”

Renji grinned. “Even when life is hell, it still costs money, eh?”

“‘Hell?'” Bri cocked his head to one side, unfamiliar with the word. “Something like that, I suppose. Having said that, you will all need to figure out what you’ll do and where you’ll go from here for yourselves, but it would be wise to make your first priority the purchase of your Crimson Moon contracts.”

“Fine then,” Renji said, picking up a Crimson Moon coin and a leather pouch. “Reserve force trainee or whatever, I’ll do it and go from there.”

Buzz-Cut Boy went after Renji, taking a red coin and leather pouch for himself. Gaudy-Girl, Manato, and Glasses-Boy did the same.

“I’ll take one too, thankyouverymuch!” Kikkawa stated, picking up a coin and a pouch. He made to pick up a second pouch as well.

“Oy!” Bri scolded, slapping his hand away.

Haruhiro couldn’t see any option but to enlist. But for what? He didn’t know. Maybe for the money and to survive in this place? If joining Crimson Moon was the only way to earn money then he didn’t see any other options, but a part of him didn’t like it at all.

Shihoru, Twin-Braided Girl, and Super-Small Girl all looked hesitant. So did Ranta and giant Mogzo. Bri’s sky-blue eyes fell on them. “And what about all of you?”

“I get this nagging feeling I’m walking into some sort of trap,” Ranta muttered to himself while making his way to the counter.

“Where there’s a will-a-will, there’s way-a-way and where there’s no will-a-will there’s no way-a-way…” Twin-Braided Girl said, following Ranta.

“Um,” Haruhiro turned his head towards her. “I don’t think we say ‘will-a-will or way-a-way…'”

“Oh, is that so?” Twin-Braided Girl turned to look at him while reaching out to

grab the red coin and pouch. “That’s the way Yume remembers it though.”

“There’s the problem right there, then. The correct way to say it is ‘where there’s a will, there’s a way.'”

“Oh, I see. But isn’t will-a-will and way-a-way so much cuter? Yume thinks cute is important too~yan.”

“…I guess that does raise your cuteness a few notches.”

“Yep!” The Twin-Braided Girl, apparently called Yume, giggled with genuine happiness.

While Haruhiro was talking to her, the super small girl had picked up her red coin and leather pouch as well. The only three remaining were Mogzo, Shihoru, and himself. For some reason, Haruhiro didn’t want to end up last, so he took a coin and pouch too. As Haruhiro was checking the contents of his pouch, Mogzo slowly made his way over and took his share from the counter as well. Shihoru was the last to pick up hers.

“Congrats,” Bri applauded, putting on a smile for them. “You are all Crimson Moon trainees now. Work hard and become independent as soon as possible, okay? When you’ve become full members, you can even come back and talk to me if you have anything you feel like discussing.”

Suddenly, there was a dull thudding sound accompanied by a grunt. When Haruhiro looked, he saw that Buzz-Cut Boy had fallen to the floor on his buttocks. It happened so fast, he hadn’t turned in time to see anything, but it seemed that Renji had kicked Buzz-Cut Boy’s legs out from under him. Tripped him on purpose? Why?

“Get up,” Renji said, face expressionless.

“What’re you doing?!” Buzz-Cut Boy shouted as he scrambled to his feet. Renji shoved him back down, putting him on the floor on all fours.

“What’s the matter?” Renji said. “Get up.”

“Bastard, what the hell are you doing?”

“The moment you saw me, you had thought to yourself, ‘Is he stronger than me or weaker than me?’ I’m about to show you. Get up.”

“Damn it!”

Renji was waiting to attack the moment Buzz-Cut Boy tried to get up to his feet again. That much was obvious, even to a bystander like Haruhiro. All Buzz-Cut Boy had to do was block him. But no, Buzz-Cut Boy tried to dodge. Renji punched him before Buzz-Cut Boy could fully evade, then kicked him again. Renji grabbed him by the ears, pulled him up, and with a shout, kneed him in the chest. Not just once but several times in a row. Renji then took Buzz-Cut Boy’s head in both hands and headbutted it with full force.

There was a loud cracking sound and Buzz-Cut Boy slumped to the floor on one knee.

“You really are blockheaded,” Renji remarked, poking his forehead with a fingertip. Blood trickled down as Buzz-Cut Boy’s forehead started turning red. “Your name?”

Buzz-Cut Boy was still down, one hand on the floor and the other across his knee. Probably, fully being down on all fours was not something he could bear.

“Ron. You’re strong, you bastard.”

“You’re pretty tough yourself. Join me, Ron.”

“Ahh. For now then.”

“That’s good enough. Who else…” Renji glanced around the room, his eyes stopping on Manato.

Manato returned his gaze, his own eyes narrowing just the slightest bit.

Renji looked away first and his eyes settled instead on Glasses-Boy. “You look like you can fight. Come with me.”

Glasses-Boy blinked several times and crossed his arms over his chest. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and gave a sharp nod, as if he were pulling his chin back. “Fine. I’m Adachi. Good to be on board, Renji.”

Renji smiled crookedly, then his eyes fell on Haruhiro.

What? Me? Is it possible that.… Haruhiro thought. Surprised, his heart seemed to leap in his chest. It was just that… not only did Renji, by all outward appearances, look strong, but he had proved it judging by the way he had beaten Ron so easily. He also had the ability to think fast and take action. It seemed difficult to work with him without being in a constant state of fear, but if he could somehow get past that there was no doubt Renji was a person that got things done. If Haruhiro joined Renji's group, things from here on out would be a lot easier.

Haruhiro admitted it: Yes, he wanted to join Renji's group. Very much so.

But he was soon disappointed. Renji, the one central to the entire group, had turned his gaze elsewhere. Haruhiro had been passed up.

"You, runt."

"Ay?" The Super-Small Girl squeaked. The smallest out of the twelve, and her voice was slight too.

"Come," Renji gestured with a single hand. 'Chibi'-chan looked confused but staggered over to Renji, then looked up at him. Renji patted her head.

"You seem like you'll be useful. Follow."

Chibi-chan nodded, "….ay." Her face was red, like the color of boiled octopus. It wasn't that she was attractive; it was more that her actions and presence were by themselves incredibly cute, like a mascot.

But useful? Really? Renji had judged her to be more useful than Haruhiro. That irritated him and made him feel pathetic at the same time.

"We're leaving," Renji said, gesturing with his chin towards the exit.

As Renji, Ron, Adachi, and Chibi began to leave the gaudy-girl cried, "Wait! Take me with you!"

Renji heaved a short sigh. "I don't need anyone I can't use."

“I’ll do anything,” she said, clinging to him. “I’m Sassa. Please, I’ll do anything you ask. Anything.”

“Anything, eh?” Renji said, pushing her away. “Never forget those words.”

“I won’t.”

“And don’t touch me without permission.”

“I… understand.”

“Good. Come then.”

“Thank you, Renji!”

Sassa opened the door and Renji’s group filed out, Sassa leaving last. When the door closed behind them, only the seven rejects, the seven failures remained.

“Gah,” Kikkawa frowned, scratching his head. “I wanted to be on Team Renji too. Renji and Ron are invincible in a fight, Adachi looks like a smart guy, Chibi-chan is adorable, and Sassa’s sweet and a beauty. Such a good party. But no use complaining about it now, so I’m going to go take a look around town. Bye bye!”

And just like that, Kikkawa was gone. Haruhiro’s eyes met Shihoru’s for a brief moment before she looked away.

“I guess I’m going too,” Manato said, heading for the exit. “Not going to learn anything by standing around here. I’m going to take a look around and see what I can find out. See you guys later.”

“Right, see you,” Haruhiro said, waving him goodbye and at the same time wondering if it was better to follow. Unlike Renji, Manato was easier to approach and he seemed like a good guy; someone who could be depended on.

Haruhiro didn’t care about Ranta, but what about Shihoru and Yume? What were they planning to do? And Mogzo was still here too. Oh, right. Maybe if they all followed Manato together… but it was too late. Manato had already left. Though If they left now, it might not be too late to catch up.

“Hey, everyone, let’s all follow Manato. It’s no good staying here…” Haruhiro began to say when the door suddenly opened.

Had Manato returned for them? Haruhiro thought, but no. The person who entered the building was a different man. He seemed older than Haruhiro and the others. His upper and lower body was covered with leather, on his head was some sort of feathered cap, and a bow and quiver were slung across his back. His eyes resembled those of a fox and his mouth was crooked.

“G’afternoon, Commander.”

“My my,” Bri turned to the man. “If it isn’t Raghill. What happened? Is there something you need from me?”

“No, nothing from you,” the man called Raghill said, glancing at Haruhiro and the others. “I heard that a new group just arrived.”

“Word sure travels fast. We only got twelve this time and only five are still here.”

“The dregs, huh?”

Ranta’s expression became stony. “And that’s a bad thing?”

“What else could it be but bad?” Raghill said glaring at Ranta before turning his gaze to Haruhiro and the three others, sizing them all up briefly. “Hmph. Our group’s missing a tank, so you there, big guy. You’ll do.”

Mogzo pointed to himself. “…Me?”

“Yes, you. Who else here is big and a guy? We’ll let you join our party and teach you the ropes. As for money, we’ll even loan you some. It’s an amazing offer. If you’re smart, you’ll take me up on it.”

“Ah, okay…”

“Seriously, Mogzo? You’re going to go with him?” Ranta grabbed Mogzo’s left arm. “Don’t do it. It’s obvious he can’t be trusted…”

“Ah, right…”

“I’m not untrustworthy! Forget about him and just come with me!” Raghill pulled on Mogzo’s other arm. “It’s unheard of for a trainee to get an invitation into a party. You should be thankful!”

“Uh, okay…”

“Don’t let him fool you, Mogzo! Untrustworthy bastards will never say that they’re untrustworthy!”

“Uh, um… ow… that hurts…”

Ranta let go. “Oh, sorry, sorry.”

“Let’s go!” Raghill yanked on Mogzo with all his strength and dragged him out.

Shihoru’s shoulders slumped. “…he’s gone.”

“That leaves…” Yume counted them, pointing at each in order. One, two, three; Haruhiro, Ranta, Shihoru. Finally, herself. “The four of us.”

“Just how long,” Bri said, stifling a yawn, “do you all plan on being here? I’m a busy person and I’ve got work to do. If you’re just going to stand there, I’m going to throw you out.”

Ranta, looking like a dog with its tail between its legs, turned to Haruhiro and the others. “Let’s go?”

“Yeah,” Haruhiro replied, looking just as pathetic and defeated.

Chapter 2: Lost and Out of Options

While it felt good to leave Crimson Moon's headquarters, where should he go from here? Even if learning more about Altana was the first step, Haruhiro and the others had no idea where to start. They didn't know anyone they could ask for help either. Renji's group, Kikkawa, Manato, and even Raghill and Mogzo were nowhere in sight. It seemed like everyone had gone their separate ways.

Haruhiro, Ranta, Shihoru, and Yume stood outside Crimson Moon's headquarters in a daze for some time.

Shihoru was the first to break the silence. "….What should we do?"

Why ask me? I'm the one who should be asking you, Haruhiro wanted to snap, but in gentlemanly consideration to her being a girl, replied instead, "Good question. What to do…"

"What… should we do?" she repeated.

"You guys…" Ranta sighed heavily. "You guys need to be more, you know, self-reliant or some phrase like that. Now isn't the time to be asking 'what to do, what to do.'"

"Any ideas then?" Haruhiro said.

"I'm thinking really hard about it. What we should do, that is."

Yume giggled. "So you have no idea either."

Ranta rubbed the bottom of his nose with his index finger. "Damn straight I don't."

This honestly kind of sucked, Haruhiro couldn't help thinking. Maybe Raghill was right, maybe they were the good-for-nothing leftovers. They were the four dregs who couldn't make any decisions, couldn't do anything on their own. It wasn't even like they decided to team up in the first place; they just sort of ended up all standing in front of the headquarters building with each other. Out of all the possible outcomes, this was probably the very worst.

“Mogzo’s so lucky,” Ranta said, and inwardly, Haruhiro didn’t disagree. “Raghill seems like the shady sort, but he’s a veteran. Mogzo’s home free, maybe even having an easy time, joining up with a veteran party who knows their way around. Why did he get picked? I’m the one that shoulda got picked. I’m seriously way more useful. SERIOUSLY.”

“I dunno about that,” Yume said pleasantly, and Haruhiro added, “I doubt it.”

Ranta pointed an accusing finger at both of them in turn. “You’re only saying that because you have no idea what I can do! Don’t forget this: I’m a man of ability! I’ve been famous as a man of hidden potential since birth!”

“Your potential wouldn’t be very hidden if you were famous,” Haruhiro said.

“Minor details! You’ll tire yourself out worrying about details all the time.”

“I’m kind of tiring myself out just by talking to you.”

“You’ve got no stamina at all, Haruhiro. Not useful at all. Nope, no good at all. No good, no good.”

“Says a guy whose only redeeming feature is his curly hair.”

“Don’t call me curly!”

“I said redeeming feature. Curly hair is a strong point, right?”

“You really think so? Is curly hair really okay? I’m not really convinced…”

“Yume’s hair is straight~yan. Yume’s always been jealous of naturally curly hair. Curly Ranta is great!”

“Really? Is my hair really that nice? Seriously?”

“Yep! Twisty hair means a twisty mind and it’s adorable!”

“Adorable? I dunno about that, a guy being called adorable by a girl… but it’s not bad, I guess. Still, twisty mind makes me sound kinda like an idiot…”

A small choked voice could be heard. Haruhiro turned and saw that Shihoru was hiding her face behind both hands, and her shoulders were trembling slightly.

“Whoa.” Ranta stared in surprise.

Yume also looked over at Shihoru; she blinked. Of course, Haruhiro was surprised, too. Shihoru was crying.

“W-what’s wrong?” Haruhiro asked, extending a hand to place on her shoulder but stopping halfway. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to make physical contact. She was a girl, after all.

“…n-nothing.” Shihoru hiccupped. “I just… it’s nothing… I’m just a little worried, that’s all…”

“Ah…” Haruhiro said.

When he thought about it, he had nothing to say. Even under these circumstances, there the three of them were, bantering away without due gravity. At least Shihoru was saying what she really felt about the entire situation.

“There, there,” Yume gently patted Shihoru’s back. “Good girl, good girl, it’s okay. Everything will be okay. How they’ll be okay, Yume doesn’t know but…”

Ranta frowned. “That’s not really reassuring…”

Haruhiro rubbed the back of his neck. “But I don’t think it’s good to stand here and not do anything. Even if we stopped talking, it won’t help. Maybe we should, you know, maybe… There’s got to be other veteran Crimson Moon members like Raghill around. Maybe we can look for someone like that and ask some questions.”

“In that case, go for it!” Ranta slapped Haruhiro on the back. “Find someone quick and get info outta them! I’ll leave it to you, Haruhiro!”

“How refreshingly original, making others do all the work.”

“Like a breath of fresh air!”

“You really piss me off.”

“To be totally blunt and honest, I don’t really care about your feelings.”

“Asshole.”

“Shut up. It was your suggestion, so go do it. That’s how things usually work,” Ranta stated. “But fine, let’s split the work then. Haruhiro, your job’s to go find a Crimson Moon member and get information, Shihoru’s job is to be all depressed, Yume’s job is to make her feel better, and my job’s to stay here and wait for you to come back!”

“Ranta, you really intend to just be lazy and stay here?” Haruhiro replied.

“I’m more than glad to do anything, but I don’t wanna do anything that’s not fun.”

“Having fun… isn’t the point.”

“But fun’s the entire point! I’m a guy whose entire goal in life is to enjoy life. If my life isn’t enjoyable then it wouldn’t be my life. What ’bout you, Haruhiro? You’re probably the don’t-enjoy-life type, what with your sleepy eyes and all.”

“This is the way I’ve looked since I was born!” It seemed that Ranta had another comeback ready to throw at Haruhiro, so he continued, “Fine. I’ll go. I’ll look around for a Crimson Moon member.”

“Finally. Why didn’t you just say so in the first place and save us all the trouble?”

Haruhiro was tempted to snap back at him, but thought better of it. Guys like Ranta had a way of making you get your hands dirty. It just wasn’t worth it.

“I’ll be back in a bit, just wait here,” Haruhiro said to Yume and Shihoru instead and left the Crimson Moon headquarters behind. He still had no idea where he should go. The direction of the sun was probably east, so that meant over there was north, here was south, and west was that way.

To the north, a huge castle-like tower soared into the sky. It made for a good landmark, so Haruhiro decided to head in the tower’s direction for now. But it wasn’t like he was here as a tourist, Haruhiro reminded himself. Was it a good idea to go there then?

Haruhiro had no doubt that everything was going well for Renji’s group. Manato

was probably managing one way or another and the excessively happy-go-lucky Kikkawa was probably unreservedly questioning everyone in town. Haruhiro hoped that Mogzo hadn't been deceived by Raghill. If not, then Mogzo probably had the best start out of all of them.

"…Guess I have no choice but to find someone to ask," Haruhiro said to himself. But who? Maybe those people, walking down the street there… but wait. Firstly, what should he ask? The reserve force. Right, he should ask about Crimson Moon. Where would he find a Crimson Moon member then?

He began searching the other passersby for someone appropriate to ask. Age didn't matter but someone who looked friendly would be good. Almost half those he passed in the street met his gaze. More accurately, they were staring at him. Was Haruhiro that strange looking? He probably was. His clothing was entirely different.

No matter where he looked, he couldn't find anyone who seemed approachable. He got the feeling that everyone saw him as some sort of alien. Or was he just being paranoid?

"Doing this is too high a hurdle. Or maybe I'm just too cowardly…"

Haruhiro wandered the unfamiliar streets, heading in the general direction of the tower and trying to summon up his courage. Well, something told him, from the back of his mind, that sooner or later his courage switch would suddenly flip on. Better sooner than later, but…

Then he arrived. Past a spotlessly clean public square stood the lofty stone tower. The buildings surrounding it were mostly two stories high, with a few three storied buildings here and there. The shorter buildings might have made the tower seem even taller in contrast, but even so, it was huge.

It was a magnificent structure. It looked extremely sturdily built and its windows and gate were adorned with finely crafted decorations. Beside the gate and here and there around the public square stood men covered in armor, standing guard, wielding spears in one hand and shields in the other. Such a heavily guarded building probably meant that someone high ranking lived there; the governor maybe, Haruhiro thought.

While Haruhiro stood in the middle of the square, staring wide-eyed at the sight

before him, a guard approached, armor clanking with the sound of metal on metal.

“What are you doing here? Do you have business with Tenbourou Tower?”

“Tenbourou? Err, no. No business…”

“Then leave. Or do you wish to be arrested on sight as a disturber of the peace of his Excellency, the Earl of Altana?”

“Uh, no, I don’t want to be arrested… Right. Sorry, I’ll go.”

Haruhiro hurriedly left the square. He couldn’t be sure, but apparently the tower called Tenbourou housed the person who was this frontier city’s earl. He got the feeling that he had successfully collected his first piece of information about this place. But anyone who lived in such a conspicuous building would have been known by all the residents here.

“Altana. Earl of Altana. His Excellency. Tenbourou Tower. Frontier… Frontier Army. Crimson Moon. Reserve Force…” Haruhiro whispered all the foreign words to himself as he continued to make his way north.

As he walked, the number of people on the street started to increase little by little. Shops. He had arrived in an area where shop stands and street stalls were crammed next to each other on both sides of the road. While some of the stands were still being prepared, more than half were already open for business. Food stands, clothing shops, sundries, all kinds of goods in large numbers could be found. The loud voices of lively merchants promoting their wares echoed through the street.

“A marketplace?” Haruhiro said to himself.

As if someone was luring him in, Haruhiro found himself heading into the marketplace. The level of liveliness was amazing. The prices of all items were written as 1C, 3C, 12C, and so on. Haruhiro could read the price tags well enough, but had no idea what it all actually meant. The merchants called out to him, “You sir, how would you like to buy…” or “You sir, come take a look at…” But Haruhiro avoided them and hurried on his way, cursing himself for his timidity even as he did so.

Suddenly, a wonderful scent filled the air. The hair on the back of Haruhiro's neck rose.

"Meat…"

His mouth began to water. Food… A stand over there was grilling kebabs, something was bubbling in a huge pot in another stand, a mountain of bread was stacked in yet another stand. Some sort of sandwiches there, meat buns over that way… The steam, the smoke, the smell. Haruhiro couldn't stand it anymore. His hands went to his stomach and found that it was sunken inward. Why hadn't he noticed until now? He was starving.

"But… but Shihoru and Yume are waiting," Haruhiro admonished himself. "Who cares about Ranta, but… it's not right to leave them there while I stuff my face. But… the old saying goes, 'can't fight on an empty stomach.' Can't walk on an empty stomach either… don't want to walk on an empty stomach… Excuse me!"

Unable to resist any longer, Haruhiro made a beeline towards the meat kebab stand. He frantically searched the leather pouch and pulled a silver coin. Would he be able to pay with this? Would it be enough? What if it wasn't enough? He'd cross that bridge when he got to it.

"One kebab, please!" Haruhiro said.

"What!?" The eyes of the potbellied man behind the stand widened. "A silver?! You don't need that much! One kebab is four capas, look, it's written right here, see? I don't do discounts, but I won't take more than that either! That's how Dory Kebabs does business!"

"Four capas?" Haruhiro looked at the coin. "You mean I can't buy a kebab with this?"

"One silver is worth one hundred capas. You can buy 25 kebabs with it. There's no way you'll be able to eat that many, right? And it's not lunch time yet, so I only have 50 capas worth of change at the moment."

"So a capa is…"

"The bronze colored coins, of course." The potbellied man pulled out a coin that

looked like the Crimson Moon trainee symbol, but maybe one or two sizes smaller, and showed it to Haruhiro. “This is a capa. Don’t tell me you didn’t know? You’re sure dressed strangely though…. You’re a Crimson Moon member?”

“Um, not really. Just a trainee. Just became one, actually.”

“I see. Well, you Crimson Moon members are all a little ‘different,’ if you know what I mean. Even though you’ve got silvers, you don’t have any capas?”

“No, no capas. And one silver is a hundred capas…” In other words, the ten silvers Haruhiro had now was the same as one thousand capas. He could buy 250 kebabs. But just one of those kebabs was so big, it pretty much made an entire meal. So 250 kebabs was 250 meals. Three meals a day and that would equal more than 80 days of food. That was quite a lot. “Sorry, I’m still just a trainee.”

“So you didn’t know about capas.” The potbellied man frowned and then took a deep breath. “I guess that means that you don’t know about Yorozu’s Bank then. Why don’t you go there and have a look? You can get change from there and, for a fee, deposit your money too.”

“Yorozu’s Bank…”

“It’s south of this marketplace. Exit from the Tenbourou Tower side, go three streets down, then make a left. It’s around there. There’s a sign outside so you shouldn’t have trouble finding it.”

Chapter 3: Yorozu

Yorozu's Bank. Or at least that's what the sign said, outside of the thick-walled, warehouse-like stone building. The letters were written in gold relief, grand yet at the same time a bit garish. Haruhiro had reached Yorozu's without losing his way, which made him feel a little better about the whole situation. Now the only problem was his empty stomach.

He was going to starve to death if he didn't hurry and get his money changed, return to Dory's, and scarf down one of those kebabs.

The main entranceway led into a hallway and above a series of stone steps was a counter. Haruhiro stepped into the end of the short line. Before long, his turn was called with a "Next!" Across the counter sat a little girl, quiet and dignified, in an enormous leather chair. She looked no more than ten years old.

Her clothes were a flashy red and white with gold highlights. She wore a golden monocle and held a golden tobacco pipe in one hand. Her attitude also seemed as grand as her appearance.

"Hm," the girl took a puff on the pipe as she scrutinized Haruhiro. "I've never seen you before. First time?"

"…Yes," Haruhiro replied, suddenly timid. What was up with this little girl? He cleared his throat and continued. "Yes, first time."

"From your appearance, you're a Crimson Moon trainee. I see. Just arrived, have you?" The girl stood up on the chair and slapped her knee. "I'm Yorozu. Fourth generation. I flawlessly memorize the first and last names, facial appearance, deposits and balances, and all transaction records of all clients. However, I also keep paper records for the sake of those whose memories aren't as perfect as mine. Enough of the introductions; let's open your account. Your name?"

"Um… It's… It's Haruhiro."

"I see," Yorozu leaned forward, opened an account book that had been lying on the counter, and began to scribble something into it with a feather pen. "Done.

Now you may begin to do business with Yorozu's Bank."

Haruhiro stole a quick glance at the book and indeed, on a brand new page "Haruhiro" was written in elegant handwriting. When Haruhiro looked up again, Yorozu's face was right in front of his own. She may have had a small stature, but ten years old she was not. Probably significantly older than ten.

Ignoring her height and looking more closely, he noticed she had very distinct features. Blue eyes as delicate as finely crafted glass, soft pink lips—she was quite a beauty, actually.

"What?" Yorozu puckered her lips and suddenly turned her head to the side with a huff. "My face isn't something you need to be staring at, Mr. Lack-of-Manners."

"S-sorry."

"Let's make something clear." Yorozu thrust her pipe right in front of Haruhiro's nose. "This fourth generation Yorozu might be young, but she is a flawless Yorozu. Engrave it on your skull and don't make the mistake of underestimating me. Also, Haruhiro, I have you perfectly memorized as rude and impolite."

"…can you please forget about that?"

"Not possible. A Yorozu is a Yorozu, so she doesn't forget. If a Yorozu forgets, she must resign her position to the next Yorozu. That is the law governing all Yorozus."

"That's pretty harsh…" Haruhiro glanced around the room. He was the only customer at the moment. No other bank employees were to be seen either. "Would you happen to be the only employee at Yorozu's Bank?"

"Inconceivable. I'm the bank's representative President and CEO. Transportation of money and goods, various areas of specialty, warehouse maintenance, and the like are handled by a large number of clerks, workers, and apprentices who work here. Do you know what kind of business we run?"

"Err, money deposits, changing money, and stuff like that."

"Not just money. Goods as well. In the case of cash, we charge a deposit fee of

1% of the total amount. In the case of goods, the fee is 2% the value of the object as determined by our professional appraisers."

"One percent…" So for every one hundred capas deposited, one would be taken as a fee. "Isn't that just plain expensive?"

"If that's your opinion"—Yorozu drew on her pipe—"then don't deposit your money here. It's no skin off my nose. But allow me to say that a reserve force soldier like you will eventually see the value of our services. So then, Mr. Lack-of-Manners, what business brings you here today?"

"Mr. Lack-of-Manners…" Haruhiro repeated. Was he going to be called that from now on?

He took out one—no, he had better make it two—silver coins from the leather pouch. "I wanted to get these changed to capas."

"Hmph. Amazingly, we offer money changing services at no charge. Two silvers is two hundred capas, but you do realize how cumbersome that is to carry, Mr. Lack-of-Manners?"

"Ah," Haruhiro recalled the bronze coins shown to him by Dory Kebab's potbellied man. They were pretty small, but two hundred coins probably added up to a pretty hefty weight. "I see. And walking around with this much money is probably rather dangerous. So that's why people pay the fee to store their money here."

"Indeed. I can instantly calculate amounts down to one hundredth of a capa, so the fee for depositing one capa is one hundredth of a capa. I memorize that and record it in your account book. When the total reaches one capa, we deduct it from your account. So don't even try to get away with things like depositing 99 capa, one capa at a time."

"In other words, don't try to cheat the system. Fine, I get it," Haruhiro said, and placed one silver coin on the counter. "Can you just change this into capas then?"

"Certainly." Yorozu struck a bell that was on the counter using her tobacco pipe.

A young boy dressed in silver-lined clothing emerged from a door in the back of

the room. Yorozu didn’t say a word, just signaled something with her hand. The boy bowed silently once then disappeared through the door again. In a few moments, he emerged again carrying a black tray. On the tray were bronze coins. He placed them on the counter, then withdrew once more.

“One hundred capas. You may take them now, Mr. Lack-of-Manners.”

“Can you stop calling me that?” Haruhiro muttered, taking the coins and stuffing them inside the leather pouch. The bronze coins were only about the size of the tip of one’s pinky, but a hundred of them filled the pouch to nearly bursting. “Pretty heavy considering the size; this might not fit in my pocket.”

Yorozu snorted. “You may deposit any amount right away if you wish. You may lack manners, but our motto is to value each and every customer.”

“I’m fine for now. Kind of inconvenient, but I’ll just hold on to it.”

“I see,” Yorozu took another puff from her pipe. “Please feel free to come back whenever you need our services, Mr. Lack-of-Manners. Our business hours are from seven in the morning to seven in the evening and we are open all year round. Whatever you need, whenever you need it, this fourth-generation Yorozu is ready to process your requests at the service counter.”

“Whenever? What about lunch breaks?”

“No such thing. I’m here from seven o’clock to seven o’clock. That’s the law governing Yorozus.”

“…Have a good day then.”

It was a tough job, Haruhiro thought as he left Yorozu’s Bank, but taking into consideration her small size, she was a very hard working person. His stomach growled again. Meat. Meat kebabs were waiting for him. Haruhiro rushed back to Dory’s Kebabs in the marketplace. He inhaled, filling his lungs with the smell of freshly grilled meat before buying a kebab. Not able to suppress his hunger a moment longer, he took a bite right there and then. The explosion of flavor and juiciness hit him immediately.

“DELICIOUS!”

He devoured the first kebab and was seriously tempted to buy a second. After a long period of indecision, he finally decided to restrain himself. When he got back he could bring Shihoru and Yume, and the three of them could come again together. As for Ranta, Haruhiro didn't really care either way.

Feeling much better, he left the marketplace only to be jolted as he remembered. "Damn it. This isn't the time to be eating kebabs. Need to see what information I can find…"

Looking around, he noticed a street that had 'Kaen Road' written on an arched signboard. A young looking man clothed in a white surcoat was walking a little ways down beyond the sign. Under the surcoat he was dressed in metal armor, and a shield was slung over his back. Some sort of sword was fastened to his belt. However, he didn't look like one of the guards from Tenbourou. In fact, he might have been a Crimson Moon member.

Haruhiro placed a hand over his chest and exhaled. Summoning up his courage, he yelled, "Excuse me!"

The man stopped and turned to face Haruhiro. "Yes?"

"Sorry if I'm mistaken, but are you a Crimson Moon member?"

"I am, but…" The man blinked once or twice, then smiled broadly. "I see. I'm guessing you must be a trainee?"

"Um, y-yes! Though I just became one. But I don't know anyone or anything or anywhere, and…"

"It's the same for everyone at the beginning. Though lost and confused, we move forward one step at a time. Advancing steadily, our paths become clear."

"I thought…. I figured it was something like that. But I'm not sure what to do or where to go next…"

"I understand," the man nodded sympathetically. "But the knowledge you gain from this experience will be invaluable to you later on. No matter which road you take, those who don't find their own way out of the darkness will never reach their destinations."

“Really? I mean, I get what you’re saying. Kind of. Will everything really be okay though? You see…”

“My name is Shinohara, of Orion.”

“I’m Haruhiro.”

“Haruhiro, myself and other members of Orion frequent Sherry’s Tavern quite often. If you need anything, come find us there.”

“Eh? Oh, I mean, right. Orion. Sherry’s Tavern.”

“That’s right. I wish you the best of luck, Haruhiro. Until we meet again then.”

Shinohara left, leaving Haruhiro with only the impression of person with a friendly smile and elegant manner.

“Question asking… failed?” Haruhiro hung his head low. He should have stopped Shinohara and kept at it. But Haruhiro also had a feeling that Shinohara would have politely but firmly refused to answer. Shinohara didn’t seem like it, but maybe he was unfriendly after all. Or maybe it was just Shinohara’s way of giving guidance to newcomers. “Find him at a tavern?”

Haruhiro looked up at the sky and squinted at the brightness of the sun. He couldn’t be sure, but he had a feeling that the tavern wasn’t open this time of day. Having nowhere else in particular to go, he continued down Kaen Road, eyes peeled for anyone else who looked like a Crimson Moon member. He passed by a few that might have been, but they were either rather shady looking, seemed unapproachable, or returned his gaze glaring disdainfully. He didn’t have the guts to stop any of them to ask.

He didn’t want to do this anymore. Haruhiro squatted down at the end of the street, past the flowerbeds and a big building that looked something like an inn, and stayed that way for a while. If he just remained like that, maybe someone would eventually get worried and ask him what was the matter. Not that he had any such ulterior motives. Okay, maybe he did. Just a little.

But they were just wishful thinking.

What other alternatives did he have? He had no idea where he was, he didn’t

remember anything but his own name, and he didn't have the slightest idea what any of this all meant. On top of all that, he had abruptly been made into a reserve force soldier. While he was busy being confused and indecisive, everyone who was worth anything had went about their own ways and the only ones left were the losers who couldn't get anything right. Such as himself.

And now, for some reason, he had ended up being the only person out running around trying to find out something, anything, about this place. And even that wasn't going well.

Because I'm too cowardly to approach anyone, Haruhiro thought. And what was wrong with that? Nothing. It wouldn't be wrong if he were to wallow in self-pity either.

Fine then. He would eat kebabs. He would return to the marketplace by himself and eat as many kebabs as he could. And not just kebabs. There was plenty of other tasty looking food too. He would eat all the food the market had to offer. When evening came, he would head to Sherry's Tavern. Maybe there was even one of those places were women would pour him drinks and keep him company. He would eat, drink, and enjoy himself until all his money was gone.

"No." Haruhiro got to his feet. While he couldn't bring himself to feel entirely optimistic, it wasn't like him to despair either. He turned around and headed back towards the marketplace.

What to do now. Maybe he should head back to the Crimson Moon headquarters. Although he didn't have any useful information to take back, a good amount of time must have passed already. Everyone else must be hungry as well. But if he was going to take them to get something to eat, they would have to make a trip to Yorozu's Bank to get their money changed first.

When Haruhiro thought about it though, knowing about Yorozu counted as useful information. He had also met Shinohara. After they all got some food, they had the option of searching for Sherry's Tavern. It wasn't like he had to do everything alone. That's right. That was absolutely right. They were a team after all.

So it was decided then. He started back to headquarters, in a more cheerful mood than he had been. But something was wrong. Using Tenbourou as a landmark, he was sure he was headed in the right direction, but no matter how much he

searched, he couldn’t find the headquarters building again.

“Am I… lost?”

He didn’t want to admit it, but it seemed that way. It didn’t seem like he had any other options, so he headed towards Tenbourou’s public square again. From there he would carefully retrace his steps. He found the path he had used to get from headquarters to the square. *So it has to be that way. If I go this way, it should lead me back,* he thought. Probably.

“Or maybe it was that path over there? Or over there? No. Or yes. Which way was it again? Damn it. Can’t remember…”

“Haruhiro!”

Haruhiro never imagined anyone would call him by name here, so he was startled hearing it called out now. It was like hearing the voice of an angel descended from the heavens. Of course it must have been some trick of the light, but it was no joke; the smile of the person who was running towards him, one hand raised in the air, seemed to radiate like a beam of sunshine.

“…Manato!” Haruhiro began running towards him as well. “Manato! I’ve been trying to find my way back to the headquarters, but I can’t. So this is what it feels like to find a saint in hell!”

“You’re exaggerating,” Manato said. He glanced around. “Haruhiro, you’re alone? Where are the others?”

“Ranta, Shihoru, and Yume are supposed to have stayed behind at headquarters. What basically happened was that Shihoru got upset and started crying, so I left to see what information I could gather while the others waited.”

“I see. And after getting the information, you’re on your way back?”

“Well…” Haruhiro rubbed the back of his neck. He was tempted to exaggerate his accomplishments, but it would be obvious that he was lying so there was no point. “I didn’t really find out much. There’s Yorozu’s Bank and that’s about it.”

“Yoruzu’s Bank? Never heard of it.”

“Really? You can deposit your money, get money changed, and stuff like that. It seems like it’s pretty important for Crimson Moon members. Then there’s a food stall in the marketplace that sells delicious kebabs… but I guess that’s not really important…”

“I also passed by the marketplace, but didn’t realize kebabs were sold there. If it’s that good, I want to try some too…”

“I’ll show you the place. I remember it perfectly… even though I can’t remember the way back to the headquarters.”

“We should head back together then,” Manato said, tone casual, as if it were only natural to do so. “I was planning to head back there anyway.”

Haruhiro didn’t know what to say. He never expected to hear those words from Manato. Of course, Manato had said ‘see you guys later’ as he left the headquarters, but Haruhiro assumed that had been just an offhanded statement and hadn’t taken it seriously. Had he been wrong? Had Manato been intending to return to the headquarters from the start?

It warmed Haruhiro’s heart a little to think so.

Manato tilted his head slightly to one side. “Something wrong?”

“N-nothing!” Haruhiro slapped Manato on the back in a friendly manner. “Let’s go. Back to headquarters. I don’t care about Ranta, but Shihoru and Yume are probably missing us.”

“Let’s go then,” Manato nodded and started off.

Haruhiro followed, and privately thought to himself once more how glad he was to have bumped into Manato again.

Manato led the way at a brisk pace, not giving even the slightest indication that he didn’t know the way. However, the path that Manato chose was decidedly different than that which Haruhiro had thought was the correct way.

That was because Haruhiro didn’t properly remember the way back.

Chapter 4: Enjoying Life in a Guild

Various things happened after that, and now Haruhiro found himself standing alone at a street corner in an area of town called Nishimachi.

“It’s supposed to be this building here…” he said to himself.

Nishimachi was where the destitute and impoverished lived; in other words, the slums. All the buildings were old and dilapidated, falling apart or falling over, and badly run-down. All the people he passed, also, were shabbily dressed. In truth, this wasn’t a place where Haruhiro would want to walk in by himself.

Why did he make that decision? He should have changed his mind when he had the chance. It was too late now though, the choice was already made.

Haruhiro decided to take a look around the building, which was made of a complex mix of stone and wood, but soon found it impossible. Even when he, with difficulty, navigated the narrow pathway that seemed to circle it, a wall made out of the same materials as the building cut off access to both the sides and back of it. However, the pathway did lead down to an extremely low door.

At the center of this rusty door was a device that had some sort of emblem-like design on it and which had a keyhole carved into it. Strange. Was this really the entrance?

“Excuse me!” When Haruhiro’s inquiry got no response, he tried knocking. That made his hand hurt, so he tentatively grasped the doorknob, turning, pushing, and pulling on it. It wouldn’t budge.

Maybe he had the wrong place. He had made to turn back when a low voice echoed through the alleyway.

“State your business.”

Where had it come from? Haruhiro didn’t know. There was no one else there but him and the door was still shut tight. He didn’t think that he was just hearing things either. It was definitely someone’s voice.

“Erm… I wish to join the guild,” he replied.

“Enter,” said the voice, and at the same time a clanking sound reverberated from the door.

Had the door been unlocked? When Haruhiro gripped the doorknob this time, it turned. He pulled, finding it unusually heavy, but it opened. Beyond the door was a narrow walkway that smelled of old dust. Both sides of the path were lined with shelves crammed full of ropes, metallic objects, cogs, and other objects unfamiliar to Haruhiro.

As he nervously closed the door shut, he found that it was brighter inside the building than outside. The light came from a lamp down the pathway and it was also there that the path turned and became even narrower. Haruhiro turned his body sideways and somehow made his way down until he finally entered a room.

It was dim, so he had no idea how large the room actually was. A desk had been placed in there and sitting cross-legged on top of it was a woman. She was casually twiddling with a knife she held in her hands. Her hair was long enough to keep half her face hidden but the rest of her body was much less intentionally concealed. In fact, her arms, legs, and chest were all broadly exposed.

“So you wish to join the Thieves Guild.”

“Y-yes,” Haruhiro gulped. It was probably better not to stare, so he averted his gaze. “That’s the plan, anyway.”

“By your appearance, you’re a Crimson Moon trainee. The second to come here today.”

“Second?”

“Not that it matters. If you wish you join us, your training will be one-on-one for seven days. I will be your mentor. An honor, isn’t it?”

“Uh, I…” Haruhiro stole a glance at the woman from the corner of his eyes. It wouldn’t do to look at her legs or chest, so he focused on her face instead. What was her age? Probably not that young. Somewhere in the thirties, he guessed. Pretty up there for Haruhiro’s sixteen years.

That didn’t change the fact that she was HOT. Her sex appeal was off the charts. He continued, “…an honor. Yes.”

“If you find this unsatisfactory, another can teach you.”

“No! No, not at all.”

“But let me tell you this,” she licked her lips and thrust the tip of the knife into the desk. “I am very demanding. If you can’t keep up, you will be *punished*.”

“…Please go easy on me.”

The woman chuckled softly and tied up her hair. “Are you familiar with the rules and regulations of the Thieves Guild?”

In Altana, there were organizations consisting of people who worked in the same profession, called guilds. The Blacksmiths Guild, Carpenters Guild, Masons Guild, Chefs Guild, and so forth. Additionally, there was the Warriors Guild, Mages Guild, Paladins and Priests Guild, Hunters Guild, Dread Knights Guild, and finally the Thieves Guild.

The guild protected an individual’s rights, offered a place to learn the trade, and guild members offered mutual protection for each other. Those who wanted to pursue work in a given profession within Altana must join the related guild. Anyone attempting to enter a trade without becoming a guild member would soon find their businesses purposely impeded upon by the guild. And because everyone knew about this consequence, no one did business with those who operated outside of a guild anyway.

Having two professions was frowned upon, but even though this was a rather severe restriction, the guild did also put effort into fostering younger generations of members. Once one became a guild member, the guild would also teach them the craft. In reality, there was no other way to learn the skills and techniques required of a profession without joining the guild.

Of course, it wasn’t about simply being listed as a member. All members had to abide by established rules and regulations or risk being penalized.

Well, according to what Manato had said, that is. Manato had even informed Haruhiro of one of the Thieves Guild’s more peculiar laws. But even taking that

into consideration, the Thieves Guild was still the one Haruhiro picked out of all the others.

“If I recall, the rules were that there aren’t any rules,” Haruhiro replied.

“Precisely,” the woman yanked the knife out and gave it a twirl. “That isn’t to say, of course, that we don’t have a code of conduct. For example, we don’t operate in an area claimed by another, nor do we conduct our business on fellow members. Conditions that apply to Crimson Moon soldiers are that one party is allowed only one Thief and that we don’t steal from fellow Thieves or other reserve force members. You will be taught this code of conduct gradually; if you become a Thief, that is.”

“I want to become one… I think.”

“It’s not about what you ‘want…'” the woman turned to face Haruhiro and held out her hand, palm up. “…if you can’t afford it.”

Joining a guild wasn’t simply just about applying for membership. Haruhiro reached into his pocket, pulled out the leather pouch he had forcefully stuffed in there, and loosened the drawstring.

According to Manato, payment was necessary to join any guild, and on some sort of previous agreement the fee was the same across all guilds. Newly inducted members into any of the guilds were also required to make it through a demanding 7-day crash course on the basics of the trade.

Haruhiro started pulling out silvers from the pouch. One silver, two silvers, three silvers… the membership fee was very expensive in his opinion, but he had no other choice but to pay. It was impossible to become a Crimson Moon member without any knowledge or skills. Haruhiro acknowledged the necessity, but that didn’t make it any less expensive. Four silvers, five silvers, six silvers, seven silvers… eight silvers total.

Eight silvers. Eight hundred cappas. Four cappas per kebab meant he could buy two hundred kebabs. Did he really have to join the guild? Yes, there was no way around it. Everyone had listened to Manato’s explanation and agreed on this course of action. Everyone else was supposed to be joining their respective guilds at this time too.

Haruhiro took a deep breath and without further thought, placed the eight silvers in the woman's palm.

The woman closed her hand and smiled pleasantly. "Our modus operandi is self-responsibility, freedom, and lack of restrictions, so we'll have you swear your oaths later on. You are now a Thieves Guild member. Feel relieved?"

"I guess? But, now that I'm a member, what about my trade name?"

"Your trade name is what you make for yourself as a Thief. As of right now, you're simply called 'New Member.' Your real name has no more use here. After seven days of training, I, as your mentor, will give you a suitable trade name. If you want a respectable name, then work hard and learn fast."

"Um, would it be okay to call you a 'Master'?"

"My, my," the woman leaned close into Haruhiro and cupped her hand under his chin. Her chest… was even more absurdly large this close. Haruhiro was dangerously close to falling over right into it. "That's not bad at all. How very nice of you."

The woman grinned broadly and stroked Haruhiro under the chin with the tip of her finger.

"My name is Barbara. This is going to be an enjoyable seven days."

Chapter 5 – Rendezvous

In reality, whether the following seven days were enjoyable or not… wasn't something Haruhiro could talk to anyone about.

One was free to quit the freedom-loving Thieves Guild at any time and, if another eight silvers were paid, one was readmitted quite easily too. However, those who were not qualified to be mentors were forbidden to speak to others about the guild's stealing techniques, surprise attack techniques, killing techniques, and other secret skills.

As a corollary, that also included everything learned in the crash course. So Haruhiro couldn't speak of any of it. Nor could he mention the name that his mentor had given to him. It was a name to be known and used only amongst Thieves, and there was no need for outsiders to know. Not that Haruhiro wanted anyone to know his name anyway.

…That was because he had ended up being named "Old Cat." According to Master Barbara, it was because his eyes always had a sleepy look about them, like an aged cat. When Haruhiro thought about it, he admitted it might be true, but that didn't mean she had to go that far. She could have named him 'panther,' or 'jaguar,' or 'wolf,' or 'hawk,' or any number of other, cooler names. Anything was better than "Old Cat."

For the time being though, Haruhiro had completed his seven days' training, which included housing and meals, and was now a full-fledged Thief.

Or not.

Master Barbara had beaten into him the rules of conduct and thieves ideology, along with the most basic thieves craft skill [Pick Lock], the most basic of all basics in fighting skills, [Hit], and the importance of surprise attacks. However, Haruhiro could hardly say that he had mastered them; he would have to use those techniques more before they became second nature.

When the time came to learn new skills, he would have to return to the guild and train with Master Barbara. And of course, payment was required, along with

spending several days overnight again.

Currently, the only skills Haruhiro had learned were [Pick Lock] and [Hit], but his proficiency levels with both were extremely low. He couldn't say that he could use either dependably.

As a graduation present for completing his training, he had received a used cloak, a worn dagger, a second-hand set of thieves tools, and a pair of old boots, all of which he was wearing now. He certainly looked the part of a thief now, but he sure didn't move like one.

Master Barbara's training had been draconian, and she made sure that Haruhiro understood that the path to becoming a Thief was steep and demanding. Haruhiro was a fledgling of a fledgling that was about to turn into a fledgling of a Thief.

Was he really going to be okay?

"Old Cat" sighed and headed towards the meeting place. It was before noon, so the marketplace was not very crowded. Only two people were standing in line at Dory's Kebabs. One was wearing leather armor and a long sword strapped to his belt. His hair was quite disheveled. The other had a bow and quiver strapped to her back and a kukri hanging at her waist. Her hair was tied into twin braids.

"Ranta! Yume!"

"Hm?" Ranta turned to face Haruhiro.

"Hrmph," Yume said as well, biting off a mouthful of kebab and turning towards Haruhiro just like Ranta.

It went without saying for Yume's cheerful expression, but even Ranta's messy hair was a sight for sore eyes. It had been a long, hard week of training. Yes, Master Barbara was sexy, but she was beyond sadistic and never cut Haruhiro any slack.

Every night, right before he curled up with a single thin, dirty blanket and fell asleep on the hard floor of his solitary cell, he imagined that surely everyone else was having the same hellish time he was. The thought didn't give him much encouragement, but it did bring a morsel of comfort.

This is actually, really, incredibly horrible. No more of this, he had thought. Having reached the limits of his endurance and unable to take any more, Haruhiro considered running away several times. His fear of Master Barbara, however, stopped him from doing so.

“Ranta…! Yume…!” Haruhiro ran towards them, raising a hand for a high-five.

“Oh?” Ranta high-fived him back, but it was clear from Yume’s expression that she had no idea what was going on, and Haruhiro’s hand swooshed through empty air.

Was he being overly happy? A little embarrassed, he cleared his throat lightly. “Hey. How’ve you two been? Where’s everyone else?”

“Alright I guess,” Ranta replied, looking around. “No one else here but us.”

“Hrmph erm murphm,” Yume said, hurriedly trying to swallow the mouthful of kebab and choking. She started coughing.

Haruhiro looked at her. “Yume, are you okay?”

“Fine. Down the wrong pipe… ”

“It’s really not good to try talking with your mouth full. It’s better to take your time, swallow first, then talk.”

“Yume doesn’t know why but Yume tends to always eat in a rush.”

“Really?”

“Yume’s Guild Master was always saying, ‘Yume, you should try to eat more slowly if at all possible.’ But not exactly in those words, more like ‘YUME, EAT MORE SLOWLY.”

Ranta gazed sideways at Yume, his expression questioning. “Can you actually use that bow and arrows? You don’t really come across as a Hunter to me.”

“You mean does Yume know archery?” Yume tilted her head sideways and puffed out one cheek. “Yume’s Guild Master said that Yume may not really be good at it. No matter how much Yume practiced, Yume didn’t really improve.”

“But a Hunter that can’t use a bow isn’t really considered a Hunter, right? All Hunters can use bows,” Ranta replied.

“But Yume wants a wolf animal companion so Hunter is fine.”

“A wolf, eh?” Haruhiro rubbed the back of his neck.

Apparently experienced Hunters were able to tame and share a common will with wolves. And actual wolves too, not common dogs. Haruhiro could see the appeal in that, and could understand a little about how she felt.

“A useless Hunter in addition to a Thief,” Ranta spat disdainfully. “It’s going to be tough going from here on out.”

“As if you’re one to talk, Curly,” Haruhiro shot back.

“Don’t call me that!”

“Um, excuse me,” interrupted a petite girl, wearing a blackish triangular hat and similarly colored clothing, standing directly behind Ranta.

“GAH!” Ranta yelped in surprise, jumping up and twisting in midair to face the newcomer.

The girl’s hat had a broad rim and she was leaning on a staff with her head slanted downwards so no one could see her face. Haruhiro, though, recognized her right away.

“Shihoru?” He asked.

The girl nodded silently. It was Shihoru after all. Ranta opened his eyes wide and placed his hand over his chest.

“You scared me, sneaking up on me like that!” Ranta said. “You’ve become a Mage but you act more like a Thief.”

“I’m sorry. No one noticed me so I didn’t how to approach everyone…”

“Can’t you just say something normal? Like, ‘hey’ or ‘hi’ or ‘oy.'”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t say anything normal. I’m truly sorry…”

“Quit apologizing for everything! You’re making me look like the bad guy!”

“If it were between you and Shihoru,” Haruhiro said, putting himself in between the two of them. “You are the bad guy. No need to get so pissed off at her.”

“Oh, and you’re a good guy, Haruhiro? Shihoru may keep them well hidden, but all you want are her HUGE BOOBS.”

“What? Hidden?” Haruhiro’s gaze reflexively went to Shihoru’s chest.

Shihoru immediately wrapped her arms around her chest so Haruhiro couldn’t tell if they were big or not, but… *Wait. What am I doing?* He wasn’t supposed to be looking. His face felt hot.

“Sorry,” he said, bowing his head.

“It’s okay…” Shihoru replied.

“You’re hiding them!” Ranta pointed his finger at Shihoru. “You can’t fool these eyes! They can see right through padding and pushups!”

Haruhiro glared at Ranta. “What kind of skill is that?”

“It’s not a skill, it’s a natural gift!”

“Shihoru, your boobs are so big,” Yume said, poking at her own chest. “Must be nice to have big boobs. Yume’s chest is flat. That’d be okay if Yume were skinny, but Yume’s flabby *and* flat. It makes Yume sad~yan…”

“…It’s just… I’m just…” Shihoru shrank back as if trying to make herself vanish. “It’s just because I’m just fat, that’s all.”

“Really?” Yume replied. “Shihoru doesn’t look fat at all though.”

“My clothes cover it up, that’s all…”

Ranta snorted. “Shihoru. Other girls must hate you.”

“…Why?”

“You’re not fat but you insist you are. Girls hate other girls who say they’re fat

when it’s not true.”

“I didn’t mean to… I mean…” Shihoru’s shoulders began to tremble. “I mean, I really am fat…”

“Wait,” Ranta said, looking embarrassed. “Wait a sec… It’s nothing to cry about.”

“I-I’m not c-c-crying,” Shihoru stammered.

“Yes you are! Look at those tears! You’re definitely crying!”

“It’s okay, Shihoru,” Yume said, wrapping her arms around Shihoru. “Don’t cry. Yume doesn’t hate Shihoru. But Yume doesn’t really know Shihoru very well yet either…”

Haruhiro frowned. “That… That isn’t exactly reassuring her, Yume.”

“Oh? Is that so? But Shihoru’s body feels nice. Soft and squishy.”

“Ahh, please don’t touch there… It’s embarrassing…”

“You two.” Ranta inhaled sharply. Very sharply. “You two are amazing! Right out in the open too! HELL YES! Give me more!”

“Everyone sure seems excited,” someone cut in.

Haruhiro turned towards the newcomer. “Manato!”

Manato was dressed in a hooded, blue-lined garb. In his hands was a short staff.

“I seems I’m the last to arrive,” Manato smiled broadly and looked at everyone in turn. “I’m a Priest, Haruhiro’s a Thief, Yume is a Hunter, Shihoru’s a Mage, and lastly Ranta’s a Warrior. Looks like our party is ready to go.”

“Why,” said Ranta, frowning, “are you addressing me the same casual way you address Haruhiro?”

“You prefer something more formal?”

“Being addressed informally pisses me off. You should call me Lord Ranta.”

“Haha… No.”

“Don’t just say ‘no’ then laugh it off!” Ranta yelled.

“You don’t have to call Yume anything but ‘Yume,'” Yume said.

“Just ‘Shihoru’ is fine with me too,” Shihoru added.

“Thanks Yume, Shihoru,” Manato replied.

“Yeeeep!” said Yume, waving him off with a hand. Shihoru, appearing fairly embarrassed, muttered something in response as well, but Haruhiro didn’t catch what she said.

“Manato.” Haruhiro raised his right hand and Manato, switching the hand that held his short staff, high-fived him. Their palms met and made a satisfying clapping sound.

Haruhiro punched Manato lightly on the shoulder. “Good to see you, Manato. What was your training called again? ‘Priest’s Apprenticeship?'”

“Yeah. How did your Thieves Guild training go?” Manato asked in response.

“Piece of cake,” Haruhiro replied at once, but frowned and thought better of lying. “…Actually, that’s a lie. It was horrible. My mentor was terrible. Real sexy, but beyond scary.”

“A real beauty, eh? Must be nice. My master was a grizzly old man, stern and had a booming voice that made my ears hurt.”

“Made your ears hurt? Manato, how much did he yell at you?”

“I don’t remember. But I imagine that his reason for being born was to yell at me. He was angry all the time.”

Haruhiro, constantly chewed out by Master Barbara, had lost all his self-confidence before he could even build any up. Honestly, it had been quite depressing. But it seemed like Manato had had a similar experience as well. Maybe it was the same for everyone joining a guild for the first time. The thought that he wasn’t the only one made him feel a little better. Maybe there was no need to be so depressed after all.

Thanks to Manato, he was now quite relieved. Manato was also the one who had found out about the guild system and who also advised them all in deciding which guild to join. If it wasn’t for Manato, where would they be now? Haruhiro didn’t even want to think about it.

“I guess now’s a good time as any,” Ranta sighed. His expression was a little off. “Actually, I have an announcement for you all. A very important announcement.”

Haruhiro raised his eyebrows. “Like what?”

“What is it?” Yume said, blinking in surprise. Shihoru gazed at Ranta nervously and Manato was looking at Ranta’s equipment and armor suspiciously.

Something was off. Ranta was dressed in hardened leather armor and a used longsword was hanging off his belt. But that was similar enough to a Warrior.

“Hm,” Manato said, his eyes narrowing. “Aren’t Warriors supposed to be equipped with chain–”

“Listen up!” Ranta was puffing his chest out so much that Haruhiro was afraid he was going to fall over backwards. “I told everyone that I was going to become a Warrior, but I changed my mind! It became completely obvious that my ungodly, unworldly genius wasn’t going to be put to use by joining the Warrior’s Guild, so I didn’t join!”

“Wha–” Manato started, but then was at a loss for words. His face drained of color.

Haruhiro couldn’t blame him. After all, according to what Manato was able to find out, there were two classes that no party can be without: A Priest and a Warrior. The Warrior was the frontline fighter, the tank who faced enemies head on with strength and fury. The Priest was the party’s healer, who supported his companions during fights. Because of that, Manato volunteered himself to become a Priest while suggesting that either Haruhiro or Ranta become a Warrior.

Ranta had volunteered himself because he had thought it was cool, so Haruhiro decided to join the Thieves Guild.

“Hm?” Ranta’s expression was completely nonchalant. “Something a-matter? Act more shocked, will you? It’s a super surprise, right?”

“Not shocked,” Haruhiro said, rubbing his temples. “More like dismayed. Why did you decide to join a different guild without discussing it with the rest of us?”

“A feeling. A hunch. Intuition. Six-sense. The gods within me whispered to me: ‘You’re not meant to be a Warrior. It’s unbecoming. You’re a bigger man than that.'”

“Then,” Manato said, apparently having regained most of his composure, though his expression was still a bit agitated, “which guild did you join?”

“Look!” Ranta pulled out a skull-like necklace–no, an actual skull on a necklace–and pointed to his chest. Seared into the leather was an emblem of a skull. “I’m a Dread Knight! Glory be to the Ruler of Death, the Dark God Skulheill!”

Yume placed her index finger on her bottom lip. “A ‘trend light?'”

“No!” Ranta yelled, spit flying. “A DREAD KNIGHT! Isn’t it an awesome name? I’m way above any regular Warrior!”

“Please don’t say,” Shihoru softly whispered, “that you became a Dread Knight just because the name was cool…”

“‘Just?'” Ranta sighed in an exaggerated manner. “Do I need any other reason? No, I don’t. No other reasons even exist, no matter how hard you think.”

Haruhiro wanted to punch the daylights out of him. He was really tempted to. But he didn't. Even if he did, it would be too late and wouldn't help the situation.

"The Dread Knight Guild has a special rule, don't they?" Haruhiro said instead. "Once you join, you're not allowed to leave. If you try, they'll come after you."

"'Until thou art embraced by the dark god, thou shalt not embrace any god besides him,' is the commandment. Understand? 'Embraced by the dark god' means death," Ranta said.

"So what can Dread Knights do?" Haruhiro asked.

"I can summon demons!" Ranta raised a clenched fist–then lowered it. "But not at the moment. During the daytime, the God of Light Lumious' power is too strong."

"So you can only summon it at night."

"For now! He gets stronger as I collect Vices!"

"So what can the demon do?"

"It whispers to me, telling me when enemies are close. And once it a while it'll burst out with demon jokes!"

"What?"

"What do you mean what? Dread Knight is perfect for me!"

"You're right," Manato nodded, smiling lopsidedly, tone dripping with sarcasm. "It suits you perfectly."

"That's right!" Ranta said proudly, missing it completely.

What a carefree guy, Haruhiro thought. Ranta may have been happy about everything, but the outlook was not good at all for the party as a whole. Were they idiots for depending on a guy like him in the first place? Haruhiro hung his head.

Yes, they were.

Chapter 6: +1/-1 Warrior

For the time being, they had no choice but to make do with the way things had turned out. Haruhiro considered leaving the Thieves Guild to join the Warriors Guild, but it wasn't practical. He couldn't keep everyone waiting another seven days while he went through the training course. Then there was the matter of money.

They had received a total of ten silvers for becoming Crimson Moon trainees, but eight of those were spent upon joining their respective guilds. That left only two silvers they could use freely. And even that wasn't entirely true. Though room and board had been provided during their crash courses with their guilds, after that, they were on their own for food and housing.

If they didn't splurge on food, then ten capas a day were enough to get by. Housing, unless they wanted to sleep on the streets, was another matter. He hadn't done the proper research yet, but it seemed that renting a room averaged around forty to fifty capas per person per day. In order to save money, they could skip housing, but they had to eat. That meant a minimum of ten capas per day.

Two silvers. Two hundred capas. Twenty days of food.

They had a to find a way to earn money. Before they could even think about buying their Crimson Moon service contracts from Bri, they had to figure out a way to live from day to day. How could they make money?

By working, of course.

So Haruhiro and the others had left Altana through the northern gate to begin working as Crimson Moon trainees. They hadn't gone far when they encountered a large man, dressed in rather shabby, dirty chainmail armor sitting in the grass by the side of the road.

"…Mogzo?" Haruhiro asked.

The big man looked up slowly and blinked. He opened and shut his mouth several times, but no words came out. Haruhiro and Manato exchanged glances.

“Huh…” Yume shifted her gaze to the fluffy clouds in the sky above. “Mogzo, weren’t you dragged off by Ragmound to join his party?”

“Not Ragmound, Raghill,” Haruhiro corrected mildly then approached Mogzo. “Is something wrong? Are you here all alone?”

Mogzo knitted his eyebrows together and gave a slow nod.

“I got it!” Ranta said, making a snapping motion with his fingers, though no sound came out. “They threw you out, didn’t they? Raghill asked you to join, but when he found out how useless and dim-witted you are, he changed his mind and kicked you out!”

“Ranta…” Haruhiro began to warn, but cut himself off. It was pointless; the kid was beyond help.

“My money,” Mogzo groaned. “He took it all. He told me to hand it all over, said he would show me the ropes…”

“That’s horrible,” Shihoru whispered.

“I told you so,” Ranta bragged huffishly. “That’s why I told you not to go. I told you Raghill couldn’t be trusted. I knew all along he was a heap of rags, a hill of trash.”

“You’re one to talk,” Haruhiro replied.

“Shut up, Haruhiro! How am I trash?! List the reasons! I dare you to list them!”

“Really? Fine then. First of all—”

“Quit it! You actually keep a numbered list of a person’s bad points? That’s a trashy thing to do! You’re the one who’s trash!”

“Wow. Being called trash by trash, that’s super insulting…”

“Mogzo.” Manato squatted down next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “You joined the Warriors Guild, right?”

Mogzo was dressed in chainmail armor, was wearing leather gloves and boots,

and had a sheathed bastard sword strapped diagonally to his back. All of the equipment looked like it was secondhand, but by appearances, Mogzo was none other than the Warrior class. Due to his large size, the new look was rather befitting.

“Yeah,” Mogzo replied, briefly glancing at Manato. “I joined the Warriors Guild.”

“That’s right!” Haruhiro clapped his hands together. “Even if it’s that Trashhill’s fault, our party’s missing a Warrior…”

“Haruhiro, when you say Trashhill, you’re talking ’bout yourself, right?”

Haruhiro ignored Ranta’s comment and instead turned to Yume and Shihoru. “What do you two think?”

“I think that would be great,” Shihoru readily approved.

“What would be great?” Yume asked, clearly not understanding.

“Well, you see, our party’s missing a Warrior and Mogzo happens to be one without a party at the moment. I mean, it’s perfect, don’t you think?”

“Ohh…” Yume replied solemnly, then focused her gaze on Mogzo. “Mogzo, would you like to join Yume’s party?”

“…Is that… would it really be okay for me to join?”

“I, for one, would like that,” Manato grinned broadly at Mogzo. “If that’s okay with you, that is.”

Haruhiro suspiciously glanced at Ranta sidelong. If anyone were to object, it would be that kid. But contrary to expectations…

Ranta cantered over behind Mogzo and playfully headlocked him. “I guess there’s no choice then! I’ll take good care of you so become a good shield for me! Be prepared to die for me, Mogzo!”

“Oh. So that was your intention,” Haruhiro said.

“What? Did I say something weird? Nope. Not at all. It’s a Warrior’s job to stand in the front lines and tank, right? They’re the ones that are supposed to take the brunt of the enemies’ attacks. That’s why their entire body’s covered in chainmail armor–high defensive potential.”

“Ranta’s absolutely right,” Manato said, expression grave as he gazed at Mogzo. “I’m not saying this to frighten you, but Warriors have it tougher than anyone else. But you can count on all of us to support you and if anything happens, I’ll use my Light Magic to heal you. So rest assured.”

Mogzo nodded. “I’ll do the best I can. But…” Mogzo rubbed his stomach. “I have no money…”

“I’ll lend you some. I’ll find a way to make do for now and once we start earning money, we don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“Let’s get one thing straight,” Ranta grinned from ear to ear, patting Mogzo on the head. “I’m not lending you a single cent. I don’t return any money I borrow, so I don’t lend my money out either. That’s my policy!”

“Is that so?” Haruhiro shot back immediately. “You’re a natural lowlife.”

Ranta stuck his tongue out at him then raised his index finger. “Haruhiro.”

“What?”

“What do you get when you multiply a negative number with a negative number? A positive number, right?”

“So what?”

“That’s what I am.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Slow, aren’t you? I became Dread Knight, not a Warrior, right? Then we found Mogzo, who’s a Warrior and without a party. It worked out perfectly and it’s ALL THANKS TO ME.”

“I’m actually pretty jealous,” Manato said with a smile. “You always have a way

of looking at the bright side of everything. It’s not something you can just want to do and then do it. It’s a real ability.”

“That’s right! Unlike that retard Haruhiro, I knew you’d understand!”

“Whatever.” Answering him back would just tire him out. Instead, Haruhiro turned towards Mogzo and stretched out his hand. “Let’s get to work, Mogzo!”

Mogzo took Haruhiro’s hand and Haruhiro attempted to pull him up to his feet. “Mogzo,” Haruhiro grunted. “You need to help me out, I can’t pull you up by myself…”

“Ah, sorry,” Mogzo replied, standing.

Maybe, they were going to be okay after all, Haruhiro thought.

Chapter 7: Slow Start

South of Altana lay a series of tall, precipitous mountains known as the Tenryuu Mountain Range. The Tenryuu Mountains divided the Grimgal continent into two parts. The southern part was considered the mainland while the northern area, including Altana, was known as the frontier.

Or at least “frontier” was what the humans called it. The main continent, Altana, and the frontier territories, north of the Tenryuu Mountains, were in the possession of the human Aravakia Kingdom. However, until about one hundred fifty years ago, the frontier hadn’t been a frontier at all. In the past, there existed several human kingdoms, and humans were the predominant race of Grimgal.

However, everything had changed with the arrival of the fearsome, demonic-magic wielding Deathless King. He did not just possess military and magical might but was a skilled politician as well. The Deathless King brought forth a new race of undead and, as their leader, did more than merely conquer. He convinced the leaders of other races to acknowledge his authority, formed a confederation of kings with them, and subsequently went to war with the human kingdoms. The humans were easily defeated and forced to flee south of the Tenryuu Mountains.

Afterwards, the Deathless King was nominated by his fellow kings to become the emperor and thus the Undying Empire was born. Until the death of the Deathless King about one hundred years ago, humans were largely unable to set foot north of the Tenryuu Mountains, but with the loss of his unifying leadership the Undying Empire fell apart. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the Aravakia Kingdom established Altana as their stronghold in the north and so it has remained to this day.

And of course, all of this information had been obtained by Manato.

The lands across the Tenryuu Mountains south of Altana were mostly used for farming or raising cattle, with villages dotting the landscape. To the north were open fields and forests.

“And around here,” Yume said, brushing her hands across the tall grass as she

explained, “there’s deer and foxes and other animals~yan. And because it’s springtime now, bears appear once in a while. Then there’s Chimos; small, fluffy, round animals with beady eyes, long, thin tails, tiny ears, hands, and feet that hop around. They’re pretty good little guys. Then there’s the savage pit rats, big as cats with super hard fur.”

“Really?” Ranta formed a visor with his hands and looked around. “‘Cause I don’t see squat.”

“Err..” Yume frowned. “But when Yume ventured outdoors with Yume’s Guild Master during training, he’d use his bow and arrow to bag game for us.”

“Maybe they’re all just hiding,” Manato said, as he pointed to a forested area to everyone’s right. “In the wooded areas.”

Haruhiro nodded. “You might be right. If I were a wild animal, I wouldn’t feel really safe out in the open where there’s no trees or brush to hide in.”

Ranta snorted derisively. “See? They all know to fear me.”

“So if we can’t find any game, it’s your fault.”

“Shut it, Haruhiro! It’s THANKS to me! It’s all in gracious indebtedness to me!”

“You shut it. Even if there were any game around, yelling like that will scare them off.”

“AND IT’S ALL THANKS TO MY GODLY SELF.”

“It’s no use, the kid’s clueless…”

“Um.” It was the first time in a while that Shihoru, who had been silent throughout the entire exchange, had spoken. “Are we going to be… *killing* animals?”

Everyone suddenly stopped in their tracks.

Come to think of it, a reserve force soldier’s job was to defend against hostile races and fight monsters. Nothing in the job description said anything about hunting animals and selling the meat or pelts.

“Yume’s Guild Master taught her the importance of giving thanks to the animals whose lives are taken.” Yume frowned. “But Yume likes animals and doesn’t want to kill them. They’re so cute and it’s just sad to kill them…”

Ranta scoffed disdainfully. “Save that sorta touchy-feely kindness for someone else, Princess. All living things eventually die and are embraced by Skulheill. I’ve got no sympathy for things I kill in order for me to live.”

“In that case, then.” Yume suddenly nocked and drew an arrow, pointing its tip directly at Ranta. “It would be okay if Yume killed Ranta so that Yume can live.”

Ranta sprung back. “I-I-idiot! Don’t say stupid things like that, flat-chested girl! Are you serious?! Quit it already! What would you gain by killing me?!”

“Yume will feel good afterwards. You also called Yume flat-chested.”

“Y-you said it yourself first! ‘Yume’s chest is flat.'”

“Even if Yume did, it doesn’t mean she wants it to be said by someone else. Especially by a boy; it hurts Yume’s feelings.”

“S-sorry! I’m sorry!” Ranta hopped forward and prostrated himself on the ground. “See, I’m apologizing! My bad! Please forgive me! Yume isn’t flat! Your boobs are big! Large! Gigantic! HUMONGOUS!”

“Ranta.” More than looking down *to* him, Haruhiro was looking down *on* him. “You’re not really sorry at all, are you?”

“How would you know?! How can you tell?! How am I not sorry? Where’s your proof!”

Yume sighed, then lowered her bow and put the arrow back in the quiver. “…Not worth wasting an arrow.”

Ranta exhaled in relief and stood up, wiping the sweat off his brows. “Anyway, you would have missed even if you tried to shoot me. But I was apologizing just in case, you know… Hey! Yume, quit that! Don’t draw that kukri! It was a joke! It’ll be painful to get cut by that! You’ll kill me! I’ll seriously die!”

“No different than killing a wild animal, I’m sure,” Manato said with a wry

smile. “Though I can’t be sure, I heard that we don’t have to venture too far from Altana to find mud goblins, ghouls, and the like. Creatures that even trainees can probably handle.”

“Goblins and ghouls.” Haruhiro tilted his head to one side. He had the feeling he had heard of those before. Maybe it was just his imagination, but he visualized them as sort of humanoid creatures.

“So that means…” Shihoru began in a voice that was quite strong, considering the way she usually spoke. “We’re going to search for these mud robins and cools.”

“Mud *goblins* and *ghouls*,” Haruhiro corrected mildly, slipping into the part of the straight man again.

Shihoru’s face turned a bright red and she shrunk back.

“Whatever, that’s fine with me,” Ranta agreed frivolously.

“It’s better than killing animals,” Yume said happily.

Mogzo nodded with a grunt.

“Then let’s head towards the forest,” Manato said.

With Manato, the Priest, leading the way, Haruhiro and the others headed toward the nearby woods.

The forest was an actual forest, untamed and unforgiving. Unfamiliar broad-leafed trees and the thick foliage underfoot made it impossible to make out any animal trails. The ground ranged from hard as rock to somewhat soft to downright squishy. It was difficult to find footing, which made walking very difficult.

The rustling of leaves when the wind blew and the singing of birds echoed all around.

“Mud puddings and mools,” Yume muttered softly. “Maybe they frequent watering holes.”

Haruhiro fulfilled his role, ever the straight man. “Mud *goblins* and *ghouls*,” he corrected. “You mean like a spring or stream? Or maybe a swampy area?”

“Let’s try finding something like that then,” Manato said.

Manato had naturally taken the initiative, but considering that this was a forest, it should have been more Yume’s area of expertise. She should have been the one in the lead. But whatever. It was fine this way too.

The problem was they couldn’t find any places with water. All the living creatures they’ve encountered so far were insects. The sound of birds surrounded them, but not a single one could be seen.

Ranta gulped in an overly exaggerated fashion. “This is like… The Forest of Death.”

“And it’s no doubt all Ranta’s fault,” Yume puffed out her cheeks and stared at Ranta. It seemed like she hated Ranta now for calling her flat-chested. “It’s because Ranta’s being so painful to their ears, all the animals have fled~yan.”

“I’m being quiet! I haven’t said a word this entire time!” Ranta protested.

“Just the fact that you’re here, your very existence is a pain in the neck.”

“Thanks for the compliment! And just the fact that you’re there makes you flat!”

Yume scowled, furious.

“Er–sorry. That was my bad. Just a slip of the tongue, speaking the truth. I–” Ranta suddenly jumped up into the air. “What the! What the hell–!”

Haruhiro blinked several times. Ranta was lifting his feet up and down like he was dancing. There was something clinging to his leg, scratching and tearing at it. It was big as a cat and covered with needle-like fur.

“A pit rat,” Yume said. She started glancing around the area. “They’re supposed to attack in packs. There’s probably more around him.”

Shihoru let out a yelp and tried to turn and run, only to slam into Mogzo.

“Quick!” Manato brought up his short staff. “There’s more!”

“What?!” Ranta danced backwards. “Help me guys! Your first priority is to save me! Help! Someone help me!”

“Fight, Dread Knight!” Haruhiro drew his dagger.

The pit rats were swarming on the ground around them at amazing speeds. Haruhiro had no idea how many. The fighting techniques he had learned from the Thieves Guild were geared towards human or things that resembled human opponents. He couldn’t even begin to guess what to do in a case like this, so he took aim and sporadically stabbed at them with his dagger.

He didn’t even come close to even scratching any of them. As expected. “They’re too fast!”

Mogzo gripped his bastard sword with both hands, lifted it overhead with a grunt, and with a yell slashed downwards… Right at Ranta. Ranta spung away with a yelp and Mogzo’s blade hit the ground where Ranta had been standing just a split second earlier. Dirt flew where the bastard sword had hit hard enough to split open the earth.

“Mogzo, you bastard! Are you trying to kill me?!” Ranta had finally drawn his longsword. But that was all he did with it, because as expected, he ran. “Damn it! Damn it! Damn it! I almost got killed by my own teammate! And he’s going to come after me again! Screw this!”

“Mogzo was trying to save your ass! You should be thanking him!” Haruhiro was getting nowhere with the dagger, so he attempted kicking the pit rats instead. They dodged him with ease.

“He didn’t save me at all!” Ranta swung his longsword with a yell. “[HATRED’S CUT]! My Dread Knight skill! I can’t hit them at all!”

“Quit wasting your techniques’ uses!” Haruhiro chose one pit rat and focused on chasing after it. It ran and disappeared behind a tree. “Argh!” He grunted in frustration.

“*Malik em paluk*.” Shihoru was drawing an elemental glyph with the tip of her staff as she spoke the incantation.

It was the [MAGIC MISSILE] spell. A ball of light about the size of a fist burst from the end of her staff… And hit Ranta squarely in the back of his head.

“GAH!”

“Huh?” Shihoru opened her eyes. It seemed like she had fired off the spell with her eyes closed and had guessed the wrong target. “S-sorry! I–”

“BITCH! I’ll kill you! Or rather, I’ll make you let me touch your BOOBS!” Rubbing the back of his head, he started chasing after Shihoru.

Without hesitation, Manato stuck his staff out at Ranta’s feet. Ranta’s foot caught and he tripped with an grunt.

“What’re you doing!?” Manato said, berating Ranta and striking out at a pit rat at the same time.

As far as Haruhiro could tell, Manato was handling the short staff with a good amount of skill but still it wasn’t enough to actually land any blows.

“Just a little!” Yume was swinging her kukri around wildly. Maybe that was why she couldn’t get close enough to a pit rat to actually hit it. “Yume’s Guild Master told her that because they’re just animals, we just need to hit them a little they’ll run away! Everyone hang in there!”

Mogzo swung his bastard sword and it hit the trunk of a tree. The force of the blow caused leaves and insects to rain down directly onto his head. Mogzo, now covered in bugs and leaves, howled.

“At this rate…” Haruhiro gathered up his resolve and crouched low, one knee on the ground.

Without running, without moving, he waited for a pit rat to approach him. There. Directly in front of him. A pit rat. It was headed towards him. Haruhiro thrust out his left arm. *Come. Take a bite. I dare you.* It was no larger than the size of a cat but he was exceedingly scared of it. It was fast. This was bad. But he waited, staying absolutely still.

Crippling pain suddenly shot through his leg, making him cry out.

Another pit rat had approached from behind and was biting down into right calf. He was just about to try to stab it when the pit rat in front of him clamped it's teeth onto his left arm. "Ahh!"

"Haruhiro! Don't move!" Manato ran to his side. He swung his staff down in a swift motion.

There was low thud sound and Haruhiro immediately felt the release of pressure on right leg and left arm. The pit rats were running away at amazing speeds. And even while Haruhiro was gawking at the other rats, the pit rat that Manato had struck had disappeared.

"Are you okay, Haruhiro?" Manato was on one knee by Haruhiro's side, examining his wounds.

"Yeah. I'm fine…" Rolling up his pant leg and the sleeve of his shirt revealed a series of small holes in his flesh; teeth marks from the pit rats, and blood was running from them. The injuries were hardly serious but they still hurt.

"Let me heal you." Manato placed his right hand Haruhiro's forehead with his middle finger resting his between the eyebrows. His fingers formed a pentagram. "O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous… [CURE]."

A warm light shot out from Manato's palm and as it flickered, Haruhiro's wounds began to close. Three seconds for his right leg, another three seconds for his left arm and it was done.

"Wow." Haruhiro touched the areas were the pit rats had bitten him. Blood was still present, but they neither hurt nor itched. And there was no trace of any sort of wound. "Thanks, Manato. And you were the one who chased them off too…"

"Only because you used yourself as bait," Manato replied.

"I was just intending to use my arm. I figured I could handle it alone…"

"Everything turned out okay. It doesn't matter who did what."

"Everything's NOT okay!" Ranta was sitting on the ground, knees drawn up and stamping both feet on the floor like a spoiled only child. "How is everything okay? We suddenly go attacked by some weird things! Even if we chased them

off, we didn’t get a single cent out of it. And look! I’m injured too! Heal me now!”

“Ah, sorry,” Manato said, hurrying to Ranta’s side.

“Why does he need to apologize to Ranta?” Haruhiro muttered under his breath, looking around.

Mogzo was sitting too, perhaps tired out from swinging around his bastard sword so much. Shihoru was doing her best to hide herself behind a large tree, maybe in response to misfiring her spell. Yume was the only one who seemed to be in high spirits, glancing around here and there. Haruhiro met her gaze and she flashed him a grin.

He returned her smile without thinking, even though this wasn't exactly a good time for the both of them to be smiling at each other. Or maybe it was. He didn't know.

"…Ranta's right that we didn't earn a single cent, even if we did drive them off," Haruhiro sighed. "Maybe we're still not skilled enough to be wandering around in this forest."

"Alright! Good to go again!" Having been healed, Ranta jumped up again and swung his arm around. "Okay! Everyone follow me!"

Mogzo blinked. "G-go? W-where?"

"Idiot! We all said that we'd search for mud goblins, right? Tell me you're joking if you just want to stop at whatever those pit things or whatever! We're not going to back off just because of that!"

"He's right," Manato nodded, seemingly deep in thought. "It's exactly like Ranta said. It's risky, sure, but pit rats are carnivores, right?"

"They might be omnivores," Yume replied. "But when they're in packs like that, they've been known to attack humans."

"Well, it's true that they did attack us," Haruhiro said.

"So they eat almost anything," Manato's eyes narrowed and he stroked his chin. "If there are animals that hunt for food living here, then that means other game must be around too."

"Of course there are," Ranta scoffed. "You figured that out just now? I've known it since a while back. If there are animals that hunt for food present here, then that means other game must be around too."

Haruhito glanced sidelong at Ranta. “You’re just repeating what Manato said.”

“Shut up, Sleepy-Eyes! Go take a nap, little boy, if you’re so sleepy!”

“I told you before! This is the way I’ve looked since I was born! It doesn’t mean I’m sleepy!”

“Haruhiro,” Manato cut in with a grin. “Most of the time, it’s best just to ignore what Ranta says.”

“Hey!” Ranta thrust a finger at Manato. “Don’t say mean stuff like that! Where you just playing Mr. Nice Guy this entire time, you black-bellied traitor!?”

“Who knows?” Manato replied with a sigh, declining to take the bait. “In the meantime, if no one is against it, why don’t we explore a little more here?”

No one was against it, so taking care to keep an eye out for more pit rats, they ventured further into the forest. There, they meandered until the sun started to set with the only other game they found being a single deer. Yume attempted to shoot it, but missed and it ran off.

They also caught sight of birds on several occasions and were attacked again by pit rats, but were able to fend them off. And that was about it.

It wasn’t funny to even joke about hanging around after dark, so Haruhiro and the others left the forest with heavy strides.

“What are we gonna do?” Ranta groaned. For once, he was hardly his energetic self.

“We don’t do anything,” Haruhiro sighed in reply. Inwardly however, he was starting to feel a sense of desperation. It felt like something inside him was about to snap. “We go back. To Altana.”

“This is like something out of the tale of ‘The Wearisome Adventures of Working Boy,'” Yume whispered.

Haruhiro again playing the part of the straight man whispered back, “Who’s that?” He had a feeling there were four ‘working boys’ here and couldn’t suppress yet another sigh.

“B-but,” Shihoru began to say, hanging her head as if she was void of all energy. “Nevermind. It’s nothing.”

Someone’s stomach rumbled. Mogzo. “I’m hungry…”

“When we get back,” Manato said, looking at everyone in turn. “Let’s stop by the marketplace and get dinner. Afterwards, I know a cheap place where we can stay for the night. Near Nishimachi, there’s lodging for reserve force soldiers. Full-fledged soldiers can show their Crimson Moon contracts to stay for free, but trainees have to pay. It’s cheap though. One room for boys and one room for girls costs twenty capas total.”

Ranta scoffed. “We didn’t earn a single capa today. We should just camp outdoors.”

“No, that’s better saved as a last resort,” Manato said bluntly. “They’re shared facilities, but the lodging also provides bathrooms and baths. Having them and not having them makes a huge difference… especially for the ladies.”

Shihoru renewed her grip on her staff and nodded silently several times.

“That’s true,” Yume also agreed.

“Bathtubs and toilets aren’t life and death,” Ranta muttered.

However, Haruhiro got the feeling that Ranta would be the one complaining the loudest if they had decided to make do without such conveniences.

“I agree with Manato,” Haruhiro said, raising his hand. Shihoru, Yume, then Mogzo also raised their hands as well.

Ranta clicked his tongue at all of them, *tut-tut*, but didn’t protest any further. And with that, without bagging any game whatsoever, their first day of actually working as reserve force soldier trainees came to a quiet end.

Chapter 8: Persistence

Yume was crouched, concealed behind a thick tree trunk. Haruhiro approached Yume, quieting his footsteps so that they made no sound, and tapped her on the shoulder . Yume turned, stifling her own nearly escaped shout of surprise with a hand .

“What’ve you found?” Haruhiro asked in a low voice.

Yume nodded and made some sort of motion with her hands and fingers. Was that her way of signaling something? But the meaning was lost on Haruhiro, so instead he peeked out to take a look.

There it was.

It was just after noon, on their second day of work as Crimson Moon trainees. They had returned to the forest and had discovered a bubbling spring. That was where it was.

It was skinny and about the height of a human child. Its skin tinged yellowish, was wrinkly and covered in mud. Patches of hair resembling seaweed grew on its head and its ears were pointed. Its back was turned to Haruhiro, so he couldn’t see its face. It wore no clothing but around its neck hung some sort of cord.

A mud goblin. It was on all fours and making strange slurping sounds as it drank from the spring.

Haruhiro took a deep breath, taking care to make sure that he wasn’t making any noise. He looked behind him. The other four, Manato, Ranta, Shihoru, and Mogzo were a little ways away, poking their heads out from where the rest of their bodies were concealed behind the trees. They all had their eyes on Haruhiro.

Haruhiro nodded. The others nodded back. They had finally found it. They were going to succeed. They had to succeed. There was no choice but to succeed. How would he signal them to go? They hadn’t really agreed on any sign

beforehand. What would be a good signal? He raised his right hand, high as he could.

He was nervous. Way more nervous than he had been a second ago. *This is bad. Stay calm. Let's do this. Let's get this done.*

He let his hand fall and Ranta charged out first with a shout. *Idiot!* Haruhiro couldn't help but think. Startled, the mud goblin turned to look in Haruhiro and Yume's direction.

"I-it's running away?!" Haruhiro said.

The mud goblin was running to the right. Yume shot an arrow at it. She missed, but the arrow hit the ground right in front of the goblin's feet. It gave a shriek of surprise and faltered.

"Nice, Yume!" Haruhiro said as he drew his dagger from its sheath and ran after the goblin, even though he had called Ranta an idiot for doing the same thing just moments before. He had a feeling that this wasn't really a very Thief-like thing to do, but oh well. They had to succeed. He couldn't let the goblin get away.

Mud goblins. Called mudgobs for short. From birth, not once did they ever take a bath. Beady eyed and ugly, with blackened teeth , a purplish tongue, and a face like an old witch. It wore nothing except for that cord hanging off its neck. It was stark naked. And 'it' was dangling around .

The mudgob looked straight at Haruhiro and let out a shriek. He didn't know exactly what was going on, but it was coming straight at him. Was it serious? Did it intend to fight? It was 6 versus 1. Maybe it didn't comprehend the odds.

Its hand. Aim for its wrist. Haruhiro slashed at the mudgob's wrist with his dagger; [HIT].

The mudgob squawked and jumped back diagonally, into the spring. Had he missed? No, blackish-red blood was running from a shallow cut on its left hand. Haruhiro's knife had just grazed it. The mudgob leapt out of the water, away from the spring and straight towards Haruhiro.

It's coming? It's really coming? NO WAY. Why would the stupid thing be coming

at me? Haruhiro thought, as it let out a low roar.

Haruhiro quickly dodged to the left and somehow avoided the mudgob's charge.

"[HATRED'S CUT]!" Ranta jumped at the goblin, swinging his longsword aggressively but without any control. It was only natural that he missed, slipped, and fell on his behind.

The mudgob roared and started charging headlong at Ranta, attacking from above while Ranta was on the ground. Its attack missed by a hair as Manato struck it on the shoulder with this staff. The goblin shrieked again and hopped backwards.

"M-malik em–" Shihoru started to chant while drawing the elemental glyph with her staff, but Ranta cut her off. "YOU'VE GOT YOUR EYES SHUT AGAIN!" he yelled.

Shihoru shrunk back. "S-sorry!"

"Mogzo, directly in front of it!" Manato said brusquely, thrusting a finger out at the mudgob. "Everyone else, surround it! Don't let it escape!"

Mogzu grunted in assent, and encumbered by armor, sluggishly ran towards it. Once in position, he pointed the tip of his bastard sword at it.

"G-guess there's no choice!" Ranta muttered, getting up and moving to the right of the mudgob.

Manato stayed on the left while Haruhiro and Yume, with her kukri unsheathed, took up positions at the thing's rear. Shihoru had her eyes open now and was pointing her staff directly at the goblin from a distance.

The mud goblin looked around frantically, trying to move but finding itself cut off in all directions. It let out an ear-piercing shriek, wanting to run but knowing that it had nowhere to go. It was exactly according to Manato's plan.

"Mogzo! Threaten it more!" Ranta shoved his own longsword out at it. "Pressure it!"

Mogzo let out a battle cry and started swinging his bastard sword at it, once,

twice, three times. The goblin nimbly dodged all of Mozgo's blows, but as it was occupied with Mogzo, Ranta was also stabbing at it with his longsword. The goblin picked up a dead branch and threw it at Ranta.

"Wah!" Ranta stepped back and barely managed to deflect it using the base of his blade.

The net had been broken. The goblin tried to make a run for it through the hole in the spot Ranta had occupied, but Manato brandished his staff, not intending to let it go. Manato's staff connected with the top of the mudgob's shoulder and it let out a cry of pain.

Now it was charging at Manato, letting out a terrible shriek that sent chills down Haruhiro's spine. Even Manato seemed to back away a bit. And why shouldn't they be frightened? The mud goblin was desperate. It didn't want to be killed. It wouldn't just stand there and tolerate it. It would try to kill, and kill, and kill some more before it was killed itself. And at the very least, it seemed to have resolved to take a few of them down with it.

"All of you!" Ranta licked his lips several times. "Now's not the time to get all scared! Kill or be killed! I'm going to kill it and get my Vice!"

"Don't be careless!" Manato warned as he landed another blow on the goblin with his short staff. This time, it was on the goblin's head. Without paying any heed to the blood spurting out, it glared at Manato and swung both its fists at him.

"The little guy is a tough one," Yume whispered, voice trembling slightly.

Jeez, Haruhiro thought. Even though blood was running profusely down its head, it seemed to be perfectly fine.

Mogzo swung his bastard sword at it three times in succession. It backed up, but doing so of course brought it closer to Haruhiro and Yume.

"Here's our chance, Haru!" And even as Yume said it, a part of Haruhiro wondered…when did she start calling him 'Haru'? But she was right; it was now or never.

As Haruhiro approached it with his dagger, it turned towards him. Haruhiro

somehow managed to suppress the urge to turn tail and instead slashed wildly with his dagger. One of the blows actually landed. He knew it because his dagger suddenly hit something hard. The mugob's right arm, between the elbow and wrist. Surprised, he drew the dagger back.

Not counting training dummies, this was the first time he had actually cut into something so deeply with a weapon. The feeling actually made him a little ill.

Blood splattered as the mudgob flailed; it spun around and around threatening the humans in turn. It was 6 versus 1. And they had it completely surrounded, so anyone could attack from any direction. But no one was moving. Everyone's breathing was ragged. Even Mogzo— and though it was true he wielded a heavy bastard sword, he really hadn't been moving that much.

What's wrong with us? Haruhiro tried to calm his breathing. Why wasn't this going smoothly? Was the mudgob a strong opponent? Or were they just too weak? Were they really capable of doing this? No, they weren't.

Thinking about it rationally, of course it was impossible. Haruhiro wasn't suited for fighting. No one else was either. This was all wrong. All of this was unimaginable. For what sake was he doing this ? Wouldn't it be better just to stop?

What would they do if they stopped now? What would happen to them?

"No one said this was going to be easy!" Manato shouted. "This is a fight to the death! Us, the mud goblin, we're all fighting for our lives! The outcome determines who lives and who dies! No one, no living creature wants to die!"

"Malik em Paluk!" A ball of light shot out from the tip of Shihoru's staff, flew between Mogzo and Ranta and hit the mudgob right in its face.

"GARGGG!" It shrieked.

"Now!" Manato commanded, striking at the mudgob at the same time.

Ranta swung his longsword with a shout. The blade bit into the mudgob's right arm. "Gah! I hit bone?!"

Mogzo raised his sword overhead and with all his might brought it down right on

top of the mudgob's head. The force of the blow smashed the goblin's head in, crushed to somewhere between a half and a third of what it had been.

It was over.

"Yes!" Ranta pumped a fist in the air.

Haruhiro started to exhale in relief then inhaled sharply. The mud goblin had gotten to its feet and was moving incredibly quickly.

"No way~yan…" Yume said, dumbfounded.

There's gotta be some mistake, Haruhiro thought. But there was no doubt about it. The mudgob was running away, probably intending to make an escape.

Manato too seemed stupefied for a moment, but then stuck out his short staff at the mudgob's legs. Haruhiro was taken aback when the mudgob jumped nimbly to avoid it. And it was headed straight towards him. Did it intend to try to slip past him?

"As if I'll let you!" Haruhiro stuck his foot out at the mudgob's legs as it tried to pass and, this time, the goblin wasn't able to dodge. It tripped and tumbled head over heels.

Mogzo moved in, getting ready to strike it with his sword but was cut off. "Mogzo, outta the way!" Ranta shouted. "I'll finish it!"

Haruhiro inadvertently turned his gaze away. There was a sickening sound then Ranta's laughter. "Behold me Lord Skulheill! Your Dread Knight has taken a life with his own hands and will offer up a portion of its body as Vice at the guild's alter! Ears are kinda big… A claw would be perfect… Oy oy oy!"

Haruhiro looked in Ranta's direction where the gobin lay, supposedly dead, and was shocked at what he saw.

Shihoru let out a little gasp and seemed as if she was about to cry.

"It's not dead…" Yume said softly. She put her hands together and muttered something indistinct in prayer.

Haruhiro hesitated a little before entering into the role of the straight man. “But it’s not dead yet…”

“We need to finish it,” Manato said, lifting his staff above his head. “Otherwise we’re just prolonging it’s suffering.”

Haruhiro didn’t want to look, but also had a feeling that he needed to see this out to the end. Manato dealt the mud goblin a final, ruthless blow, and then confirmed that its breathing had stopped. He made a gesture that resembled a hexagram, and looked as if he was considering offering a few last words as well. But he didn’t say anything. Perhaps it was because he didn’t want to make any excuses for doing something that was considered his job.

“M-Manato!” Ranta pointed a finger at him. “You bastard! You stole my kill! I told you I needed to collect Vices!”

Manato forced a smile then scratched his head. “Sorry. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Sorry doesn’t cut it!”

“Even if it doesn’t cut it, I already apologized and said I didn’t mean to.”

“Doesn’t matter! I want a redo! DO EVERYTHING OVER! How are we going to do that? WE CAN’T!!” Ranta moaned. “My celebratory first Vice… RUINED.” He dropped down on all fours and beat on the ground with a fist. “Fine, whatever then.”

Haruhiro blinked. “That’s it?”

“What’s done is done,” Ranta said, getting up and crouching down by the mudgob’s body. “Ew, pretty gross. This thing hanging off its neck’s our reward? What is it?”

Haruhiro crouched next to Ranta. He tried not to look at the actual body, but focused instead on the cord it had around its neck. “What thing?”

The thin cord looped through several small objects. One of them looked like some sort of animal’s fang with a hole drilled into it. Another object was quite dirty but… Indeed, it was some sort of coin.

“A silver?” Haruhiro guessed. “It’s got a hole in it though…”

“Nice!” Ranta reached out to pull the cord off, then quickly withdrew his hand again. “Haruhiro, you remove it. It’s too dirty for me to touch…”

“Fine.” Haruhiro cut the cord with his dagger then pulled off the fang and coin. It was a silver after all; damaged, but a silver nonetheless. “I wonder if we can sell this… How did it manage to punch a hole in something this hard?”

“In any case,” Manato put a hand on Haruhiro’s shoulder. “This counts as our first victory.”

“And it’s all thanks to me!” If Ranta puffed out his chest anymore, he would have definitely fallen over backwards.

“Right,” Yume said, tone chilly.

Ranta stuck his tongue out at her. “So you still have a grudge against me, just for calling you flat. Pigheaded brat.”

“Being stubborn has nothing to do with the size of Yume’s breasts~yan!” Yume cried .

“That’s right! It has nothing to do with it so just forget about it! Water under the bridge! I’ll say it outright, pigheadedness leads to small-breastedness and it’s been that way since forever ago!”

“Boobs are cute big or small!”

“BOOBLESS BOOBLESS BOOBLESS BOOBLESS BOOBLESS! Welcome Ms. Boobless, goodbye Ms. Boobless ! BOOBLESS!”

Yume’s face turned a bright red and her cheeks made like a pufferfish. She nocked an arrow onto her bow and aimed it at Ranta. “Yume is going to shoot you, and she has a feeling she isn’t going to miss…”

“W-wait! You–Sorry! I’m sorry!” Ranta twisted his body around, spun several times, and prostrated himself on the ground while still spinning. “I’ll stop! I’ll stop it, so forgive me already!”

“I didn’t hear a ‘please’. And what you should say is ‘Please find it in the kindness of your heart to forgive me, Lady Yume!'”

“L-Lady Yume! Please I am sorry forgive me I’m begging I’ll do anything you ask! ”

“Nope, not convinced.” Yume’s cheeks were still puffed out but, unexpectedly, she lowered her bow a bit. She gestured with her chin to the bubbling spring. “Jump in there then.”

“Wha–?”

“The spring. Jump in there. Jump in and I’ll forgive you for what you said today.”

“I-idio–you–that’s–who do you thi–”

Yume raised her bow again. “Fine. Yume will simply shoot you then.”

“…I will be happy to jump in.”

“Good luck.” Haruhiro patted Ranta on the shoulder.

“Be careful,” Manato said to him with a grin.

“Like I don’t already know to be careful…” Ranta muttered.

Just as he prepared to jump into the pool of water, Shihoru whispered, “He had it coming.”

Haruhiro didn’t miss what Shihoru had said, but Ranta was already leaping in midair, so he probably didn’t hear her at all.

“H-He’s definitely going to catch a cold,” Mogzo remarked.

Chapter 9: Heavy Resolution

Scattered about Altana’s marketplace were a few shops that sold sundries, but no matter which, the highest any would pay for a silver coin with a hole in it was thirty capas. Haruhiro found it rather incomprehensible that the value of the coin was cut by two-thirds just because it was a little damaged. But quite unexpectedly, the animal fang had been worth one silver.

Three species of wolves dwelled in the forested areas of the frontier. There were the forest wolves, sometimes called grey wolves, there were the white wolves of Eldritch the White Goddess, and finally there were the enemies of the white wolves: the black wolves of the Black God, Rigel. Apparently, the fang they found on the mudgob belonged to a black wolf.

It was believed that the fang of a black wolf contained magical power and made for a good charm against warding off evil. That brought the total of their day’s earnings to one silver and thirty capas.

Twenty capas were paid for their lodging that night while the rest was split evenly among the six of them. That made for eighteen capas per person while Manato held on to the remaining two capas, to be added to their earnings next time.

After each of them got dinner at the marketplace, they made their way back to the shabby reserve force soldier lodge near Nishimachi. For some reason, it felt like they had finally returned home. Despite the fact that reserve force soldiers who presented their Crimson Moon contracts could stay for free, the place was empty.

The public bath was a single room with a hole lined with stone, dug into the dirt floor, which acted as the bathtub. The boys went in and washed themselves first, then let Yume and Shihoru know that the baths were available to use before returning to their shared room. Haruhiro was rather tired, so he laid down on his straw-lined bunk and closed his eyes.

The lodge offered two types of rooms; one of them could accommodate up to four people while the other could accommodate up to six. Both were the same

price at ten capas per night, so the sizes of the rooms were probably the same as well. The only difference was that the six-person room was equipped with six beds, making it very cramped. Not to mention the six-person room beds were smaller than normal.

The beds in the four-person room were already on the small end, but the beds in the six-person room were too small even for the 5’6″ Haruhiro. The 6’1″ Mogzo would definitely not fit into them. Their room was bare of all furnishings except for two straw-lined bunk beds and a single lamp that hung off the wall. Except for sleeping, the room couldn’t really be used for anything, and no one was intending to use it for anything else either.

It was going to be yet another early morning tomorrow and Haruhiro intended to turn in for the night. The soft crunching of straw could be heard in the bunk next to him; it seemed as if Mogzo also intended the same. Bunking was arranged with Haruhiro on a top bunk and Manato on a bottom of one set, while on the second set next to them was Mogzo on the bottom and Ranta on the top.

“…Manato? Are you still up?” Haruhiro whispered.

“Yeah, I’m still awake. Something wrong?”

“It’s nothing, really…” But that wasn’t entirely truthful.

They had only earned eighteen capas each today. From the ten silvers Haruhiro had received from Bri, eight had been paid to his guild and he had spent four capas on a kebab. That had left him with one silver and ninety-six capa after the weeklong training course with the Thieves Guild. Yesterday, he had spent four capa on lodging, then another ten on food, without earning a single capa. Then today, he spent twelve capa and earned eighteen. Presently all the money he had came to one silver and eighty-eight capa.

However, carrying around all those coins had become cumbersome, so he had deposited sixty capa at Yorozu’s Bank, which meant that the deposit fee would eventually be deducted as well.

Haruhiro was still okay, but he was concerned for Mogzo. His share of the lodging fee was split between everyone and Manato was lending him money for food. And perhaps it was because of his size, but he would eat quite a large amount. Mogzo was already in debt.

How long would it be before Haruhiro ran out of money and had to borrow from someone else too? No, unlike Mogzo who could borrow money from them, Haruhiro wouldn't drop into the negative unless he could find someone to lend him money as well. He would just hit zero and be moneyless. When that happened, what would he do?

They needed to find a way to increase their earnings. Food and lodging per day was about fifteen capas. It would be great if he could make around double that. Wait, double? Only double? The lodge they were using was run-down and dirty. The straw-lined beds were hard, uncomfortable, and lacked blankets. The shallow holes in the ground that served as toilets smelled sickeningly of human waste and the walls of the bathhouse were so thin that when winter came, the inside would probably be freezing.

He wanted better lodging. But even before that, he wanted at least a set of spare underclothes. He only had one pair of underwear now, which he washed in the baths and hung up to dry overnight. That meant that even now, he wasn't wearing any underwear. Neither he, Manato, or Ranta had need to shave very often but Mogzo's face was starting to look extremely unkempt. They had to at least be able to buy a razor, or even a small knife.

They needed to earn enough money to buy daily necessities. The mudgob they had run across today just happened to be carrying a black wolf fang that sold for one silver, but what if that was just a lucky find? Did that mean that today's earnings were on the high end? Or was it on the low end?

Even if they were able to find and bring down another mud goblin tomorrow, it didn't guarantee that it would be carrying a damaged silver either. Damaged silvers were worth thirty capas, which meant five capas each when split among the six of them.

Even if they spent the night on the streets, it still wouldn't be enough to live on. When he thought about it, Haruhiro realized how bad of a situation they were all in.

He wanted to say exactly that to Manato, but stopped. If he opened his mouth to say something about it, it couldn't be left just at that. He would have to actually do something about it. Today hadn't exactly been a horrible day and no one knew what the future had in store; tomorrow might be even better, so maybe it

was better just to leave it as is.

“It’s nothing,” Haruhiro concluded.

“I see,” came Manato’s reply. “If you say so then.”

“Allllright!” Ranta suddenly jumped down from his top bunk. “I’m going out for bit!”

Haruhiro sat up. “What? Where?”

“Yesterday, I decided to pass.” A dark smile appeared on Ranta’s face. “But not today! A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Haruhiro said.

“Slow, aren’t you? What’s there not to get? The baths, idiot. B-A-T-H-S.”

“What about the baths?”

“The girls are in there right? Washing their bodies and hair… and completely naked. So there’s only one thing I, as a man, am supposed to do.”

“Y-you… You’re not…”

Ranta cackled. “Here I go!”

“No way! You can’t do that!” Haruhito climbed down from his top bunk and chased after Ranta.

Only at times like this could Ranta move fox-like, quick and nimble. Haruhiro wasn’t able to catch up to him until he was already at the baths. They were located in a different building than the main lodge but the two were still attached; it had been built as an annex on the side, so perhaps it was more accurate to call it a bathhouse rather than a bathroom.

Ranta crouched low at the entrance and put his ear against door.

“Ranta–” Haruhiro started to say, but was cut off by a furious-looking Ranta putting his index finger to his lips.

Ranta's expression clearly said that he would murder Haruhiro if he said another word. Intimidated, Haruhiro shut up. What was he going to do? He quieted his footfalls and approached Ranta.

"You can't," Haruhiro whispered in Ranta's ear. "This isn't something any human being would do…"

"I know," Ranta mouthed the words silently to Haruhiro. *"I don't care if I lose my humanity. As long as I reach my goals, I don't care if I become a demon or an Asura."*

"Demon, Asura, whatever, you're still overdoing it. Don't you have any self control?"

"Self-control?" Ranta shrugged. *"Never heard of the word. You gotta use words that are in my dictionary."* He suddenly exhaled sharply.

"What?"

Ranta pointed at the door. *"You can hear them, their voices."* He chuckled softly.

Without thinking, Haruhiro started to put his ear to the door. Then he stopped, regaining control of himself. *It's not right to do this.*He admitted that he was curious, but if he gave in, he would become the same as Ranta.

Ranta laughed soundlessly. *"Now's not the time for self-control, Haruhiro. Besides, you've already given in to your baser instincts. If you hadn't, then why aren't you dragging me back by force or yelling warnings at them?"*

Ouch. Ranta sure knew how to hit home. Haruhiro place a hand over his chest, looking around, and almost yelped in surprise—someone else was there, just out of sight in the darkness. Two people. And they were coming his way.

"Hey." The newcomer raised a hand in greeting. It was Manato. And behind him was a giant of a person. Mogzo.

Ranta blinked as if his eyes had been lying to him. *"You guys…"*

"No, I can expl–" Haruhiro started to say, but was cut off when Manato brought his index finger to his lips to indicate silence.

No way. Of all people, Manato too?

Yes, Manato too. Was this really okay? Haruhiro looked questioningly at Manato, who gave him a silent nod in reply. Mogzo too, nodded. Haruhiro laughed soundlessly. They had lost.

Congrats, animal instincts, congrats. We raise our glasses to you.

Honestly though, he was rather curious. And it wasn't like they could see anything, so it wasn't actually peeping right? There happened to be a paneless window above them where light and steam was pouring out in a sort of 'please-come-here-and-take-a-look-through' sort of way… but it was too high for any of them to reach.

Maybe if he rode on someone else's shoulders or if someone boosted him up, it would be reachable, but he had no such intentions of doing any such thing. Nope, not at all. The mere thought of it never even occurred to him. He couldn't possibly do any such thing. No, no, no.

Haruhiro and the others crowded together at the bathhouse entrance and put their ears to the door. They could hear voices, but rather faintly. *Concentrate harder.* He should be able to hear better. Yes, that was it. He could hear them now and clearly too.

"Even though you were wearing that…" Yume's voice.

"W-w-what?" Shihoru's reply.

"Turns out they're big, just like I thought."

"…What? W-what are?"

"Your boobs. They're so big… and adorably round…"

"A-adorable?"

Whether it was by chance or not, Shihoru's words echoed exactly what Haruhiro was thinking. And probably not just Haruhiro either. Ranta, Mogzo, Manato, everyone was probably thinking the same thing: 'Big, round, and adorable…' Just what exactly did they look like?! He couldn't even imagine…

“Yes, adorable. Can I feel them, just a little?”

“Th-that’s, ah, tha–umm–wha–ohhhh…”

“Wow. I had a feeling they would feel really good to touch, and they really do!”

“Wait–ahh… nyaaa…”

“‘Nyaa, nyaa’ you sound like a cat, Shihoru.”

“Y-Yume, please… don’t… please don’t touch… there…”

“They go boing-boing, BOING-BOING…”

“P-please don’t… It’s e-embarrassing…”

“It would be fun if Yume had bouncy boobs too. But Yume’s boobs just do this…”

“Ah, I-I think Yume’s boobs… are cute too, though…”

“No, that’s not true… How are Yume’s boobs cute?”

“Uh… They’re not fat like mine, but they still seem soft…”

“…But yours aren’t fat at all. Yume’s are flabby…”

“They’re soft so… I’m sure they’re… they look t-tasty.”

“‘Tasty?’ Shihoru, don’t say weird things like that. Yume isn’t edible.”

“Ahh… Umm… I know, that’s… that was just… a figure of speech.”

“But maybe just try to give them a little lick? Here…”

“Uhh… B-but…”

“But it’s okay to take a big bite too… maybe around this spot? Here, just a little taste…”

What was going on? What was this? Haruhiro stepped away from the door and

shook his head. This was no good. No good. No good at all. What were Yume and Shihoru doing in there? What was happening? His imagination was running in all sorts of directions.

Were these the sorts of conversations girls had when boys weren't around? He didn't know. How was he expected to know stuff like this?

When Haruhiro looked, Ranta, Manato, and Mogzo had also stepped away from the door. It was just too much… stimulation. It was all a riddle. Wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma, and it all jumbled together inside his head. Haruhiro met Manato's gaze. *Let's go back. Back to our room,* he signaled. But Manato was already looking somewhere else.

Haruhiro followed his gaze and saw that Ranta was gazing up at the night sky. No, that wasn't it. It wasn't the night sky he was looking at. It was the bathhouse window.

Ranta was staring at the bathhouse window with the ravenous eyes of a starving wolf. Ranta stood up to full height and stretched to reach the window. He couldn't. He looked over at the rest of them, his countenance strangely Asura-like.

"You guys don't want to take a peek? Seriously? Is it really okay to let his chance slip by? Can you really say you're not going to regret it? Really?"

"Well…" Haruhiro gritted his teeth. *"That's…"*

"I might regret it," Manato said frankly. *"I can't say for sure that I won't regret it. But what's going to happen if we go any further?"*

Ranta knitted his eyebrows together and frowned. *"What do you mean 'what's going to happen'?"*

"Think about it. Even now, we're all pretty… excited. It'll be worse if we get even more so. There would be no turning back. Then we return. To our room. The four of us. Four boys. I won't be able to hold back then. But if we stopped here and now…"

Haruhiro shuddered. As expected of Manato, he really thought things through. It would be more than horrible if things ended up like that. If they stopped now

though, they could all just go back full of satisfying fond memories… or something like that. Supposedly satisfying. Probably satisfying. Or maybe not satisfying at all.

This was the critical moment though. If they crossed that line, there would be no going back. If it were up to Haruhiro, everyone would be on their way back already. He had already sort of crossed a line… If only he had stopped then. But he wanted to avoid regretting it if this developed any further.

"Let's go back." Haruhiro grabbed Ranta by the arm, intending to drag him back by force if need be. But he never anticipated that the real threat would come from another direction entirely.

Mozgo stood up slowly and moved towards the window. When he was directly beneath it, he bent halfway down and put both hands against the wall. A platform? He had made himself into a platform? He looked up in Haruhiro and the others' directions and gave a thumbs up.

"Don't worry about me, everyone, climb up."

Haruhiro looked at Ranta, then turned his gaze to Manato. Both of them looked as if they had been struck by lightning. *Not possible,* Haruhiro thought. But Mogzo's determination was set in stone. Could they really reject his offer? No, they couldn't. Not possible.

There was no other choice.

Haruhiro nodded at Manato. Who would go first? Haruhiro was okay with going afterwards or even last. The one who was probably the most eager to take a peek was Ranta. But Ranta was crying. He was actually crying, with tears running down his face and his nose dripping. Without bothering to wipe himself dry, he patted Mogzo on the back.

"Dammit, Mogzo. Don't make me cry like this!"

"Oy!" Haruhiro said, then turned on his heels towards the window to take a peek. Manato, however, was the faster and cut in front of Haruhiro.

"Why does Yume hear Ranta's voice!?" Came Yume's voice from the bathhouse.

“Shit!” Ranta made a run for it while proclaiming in a loud voice. “It wasn’t me! I had nothing to do with it! It was Mogzo! It’s all Mogzo’s fault! I didn’t see or hear anything!”

Mogzo tipped over clumsily with a loud grunt and Shihoru’s scream could be heard from within.

“Stupid Ranta!” Yume kicked the wall from the inside. “Pervert! Idiot! Douchebag! GO TO HELL AND NEVER COME BAAAAAAAAAACK!”

Chapter 10: Damroww

They confessed everything to Yume and Shihoru, and then apologized wholeheartedly. Haruhiro, Manato, and Mogzo, that is. Ranta defiantly claimed that he didn't see anything, so there was no need to make such a fuss about it, and thus incurred both Yume's and Shihoru's wrath; they thoroughly ignored Ranta from then on.

However, it was hard to say whether their lack of teamwork became any worse, just from that. In fact, it probably had no effect. The next day, the day after that, and the day after that, they didn't earn that much. And by "didn't earn that much" what he really meant close to zero. And by "close to zero" what he really meant was "exactly zero."

Haruhiro didn't want anyone asking about the state of his finances, so he had no idea how the others were doing either. Of course, he was acutely aware of how much money he himself still had. During the last three days, he had spent fourteen, thirteen, and twelve capas each day. That meant thirty-nine capas spent with zero earned. If the one capa technically owed to Yorozu's bank counted, then the total sum of Haruhiro's remaining money came to one silver and forty-nine capas.

All thoughts of buying daily necessities such as razors or a spare pair of underwear had vanished. Staying at a better lodge? An outlandish dream that was laughably ridiculous now. If he spent successively one less capa on food per day, how much longer could he make his money last? That was now his most immediate and pressing concern.

Their earnings, having been zero for three straight days, resulted in dismay so immense that when they returned to the lodge for the night no one spoke a single word to each other. They all just went immediately to bed, but it wasn't as if anyone could fall asleep right away either. There was no one amongst them with strong enough nerves to just go to sleep in the situation they were in.

Or so Haruhiro thought, until he heard Ranta's snores from the bunk beside him. That kid really was something. After getting past his initial disgust, Haruhiro found himself rather impressed. Maybe it was better for him to just go to sleep

rather than keep thinking about the past. Today was over, tomorrow might bring something better, and tomorrow was more important since he couldn't do anything about what happened today. So what were they going to do tomorrow?

Renew their hunt for monsters. Even if they only earned one capa, that would be fine—no, one capa was no good, no good at all. He wanted to earn a lot of money. As much money as he could. He was determined to not be left with nothing. As he turned over in his bunk, he felt the movements of someone getting up.

"Manato?" Haruhiro called tentatively.

"What is it?"

"Where are you going? It's still nighttime. Rather, it just turned nighttime. The bathroom?"

"No." Manato stood up. "I'm going out for a bit. It's not anything important so don't worry. I'll be back soon."

"Going out at this time of night? Where?"

"It's not that late yet," Manato said, as he flashed a smile. "I'll be back. It's been a long day, go ahead and get some rest."

"Ah, okay." But even as the words came from his mouth, Haruhiro thought that maybe it was better not to let Manato go alone. But it was too late. He was already gone.

Still a little worried, Haruhiro struck up a casual conversation with the still-awake Mogzo and after a while, eventually fell asleep. When he woke, Manato had returned and was already up and about.

"Morning, Haruhiro," Manato called. "I thought we'd try going somewhere different today. What do you think?"

Apparently, Manato had gone to Sherry's Tavern located on Kaen Road the night before to gather information from other Crimson Moon members. At the tavern, he bought drinks for people, had drinks bought for him in return, and even now still seemed a little hung over. But the issue didn't stop at his overdrinking;

Manato must have spent quite a lot of money, too.

“You should have taken me with you,” Haruhiro said.

“Haruhiro, you can drink?”

“I don’t know.” Haruhiro rubbed the back of his neck. “I don’t remember if I ever drank or not.”

Manato smiled devilishly. “I don’t dislike drinking, so I wasn’t there all for business. Maybe part of me wanted to loosen up a bit.”

Later, when Manato brought up to the others his proposal to change location, they all readily agreed. Everybody was sick of forests.

There was a city about an hour’s walk, roughly two and a half miles northwest of Altana. In reality, it wasn’t a city so much a former city. Presently, no one, not even a single child, lived there – no one human, that is. Eighty percent of the defensive wall that surrounded the city was in shambles and more than half the buildings, perhaps closer to sixty or seventy percent, were collapsed. Rubble lay scattered about, plant life had overtaken areas here and there, and rusty swords, spears, and other weapons lay strewn about or sticking out from the ground. And frighteningly, skeletal remains could also be seen all over.

Animals that seemed to be neither dogs nor cats roamed about the crumbling walls and broken rooftops but disappeared as soon as they sensed Haruhiro and the others approach. An incessant cawing sound could be heard and when they turned towards the source of it, they saw a few dozen crows gathered on the remains of a large building being used as a perch.

Long ago, Damroww used to be the Aravakia Kingdom’s second largest city and by far larger than Altana. However, when it was attacked and taken by the Deathless King and his confederation, it became of the undead. Now, it was different. After the passing of the Deathless King, his former goblin slaves rebelled, drove the undead out of the city, and then claimed it for themselves. Damroww was now primarily goblin territory.

However, located in the southeast area of the city was Damroww’s Old Town, a section of the city that had been left long neglected by the goblins. That wasn’t to say that there were no goblins around though. There were.

“Just… one?” Haruhiro was hidden behind a wall that felt like it would collapse if he put even the slightest amount of weight on it. He was in the ruins of a house where all that remained of the actual building was the foundation.

He was the Thief, so the task of scouting had been left up to him; however, he had no skill in either [STEALTH WALK] or [PILFER]. The most he could do was [PICK LOCK] which made him no different than an ordinary person who had some skill in opening locks. Was it really okay to let him do the reconnaissance for the party?

The mud goblin they had killed in the forest before was one of many species of goblins. The one that Haruhiro had found here certainly resembled a mud goblin, but it’s skin was a yellowish tint and it wasn’t covered in filth. It was also clothed and had a kind of club-like weapon hanging from its waist. Slung diagonally across its back was a small sack–a goblin pouch.

While mud goblins kept all their valuables on a cord around their necks, proper goblins kept theirs in pouches. Everything they had of value was kept in there, on their person, at all times.

The particular goblin Haruhiro was watching had sat itself down, gruffly crossed its arms across its chest, and leaned back against a wall. It hung its head down and closed its eyes. It was still daytime though, so it seemed like the thing was about to take a nap. Haruhiro hurried back to where the others were waiting, taking care not to make any sound as he moved.

“One goblin and it seems to be asleep,” he reported.

“Okay, then. Let’s go for it.” Manato’s expression tensed as he went on. “Mogzo’s chainmail armor is going to make noise no matter how careful he is, so Haruhiro, Ranta, and I will approach it first. Mogzo, Yume, and Shihoru follow and close in after us. The three of us will try to close in and kill it in one blow without waking it up. If it does wake, however, Yume target it with your bow and Shihoru with your magic. Mogzo, come and back us up quick as you can. If it comes down to a dogfight, use the same formation as before. Everyone encircle it and don’t give it a chance to run.”

Everyone nodded immediately in reply. They hadn’t made any money in the last three days, so even Ranta was dead serious now.

Manato, Haruhiro, and Ranta set off with Manato in the lead. They reached the remains of the house in no time at all; from there, things got a little tougher. The ruins of the house were strewn with rubble, making any misstep potentially disastrous. Navigating towards the sleeping goblin took more time than they anticipated and there were several times when their footfalls produced noise.

Finally, they were within two or three steps of weapon range. Mogzo and the others held their positions past the boundary of what used to be the house. Manato, Haruhiro, and Ranta looked at each other in turn. Ranta then pointed at himself. Haruhiro wondered if it was okay to trust Ranta to get this right, but Manato waved a hand in a signal to go ahead.

Ranta let go of the breath he had been holding and approached the goblin. Rather than bringing his long sword up for an overhead swung, he thrust the tip of it at the goblin's head. The goblin opened its eyes with a grunt. It noticed Haruhiro and the others right away and seemed to realize exactly what was happening.

With a loud cry, it stretched out an arm to make a grab at Ranta's head. Ranta ducked as Manato shouted, "Watch out!" and spun his short staff around to hit the goblin on the arms and head in quick succession.

"Damn it!" Ranta thrust his long sword into it then pulled it back out with a twist.

Haruhiro remained where he was, impotent. If he went in now, he had a feeling he would just be getting in Manato's and Ranta's way as they fought. The goblin flailed and thrashed about, cursing in some sort of unknown language, but gradually stopped moving.

The mud goblin had put up more of a fight. Was it because they had caught this one asleep and unawares? Soon enough, it was still.

"…Did we kill it?" Ranta breathed heavily as he leaned forward and peered closely at the goblin's face.

An image of the goblin springing back up and biting Ranta on the nose flashed through Haruhiro's mind, but nothing of that sort happened. Manato briefly closed his eyes and drew a hexagram in the air. It was over.

Mogzo, Yume, and Shihoru entered the remains of the house. Ranta placed his

boot on the goblin's head and pulled his long sword out, muttering, "Gotta remove a claw, or something… Need something for a Vice, need something for a Vice…"

Manato gingery removed the goblin pouch from its body and opened it up. Haruhiro's eyes widened. "Silvers!"

Did goblins have a fondness for collecting human-made coins? And not just one silver coin, but four. Unlike the one they found on the mud goblin, these didn't have holes in them. There was also a sort of glass-like stone and slender, finger-like bones from some sort of animal.

Yume's eyes turned into dots, and she sighed. "Wow. It's a record~yan. Though it's only our second kill…"

"Four silvers." Shihoru blinked again and again, lost for further words.

Mogzo simply gaped slack-jawed.

Manato looked skywards. Then he gave a long sigh and shook his head. "No, not yet. There's no point unless we keep going. It was easy this time, but that doesn't mean it'll be easy every time. Now isn't the time to relax. We need to search for our next target."

"Manato," Ranta patted Manato's back. "You need to loosen up. We finally got our first big victory! And IT'S ALL THANKS TO ME! Why shouldn't we do a little celebrating?"

Manato's expression turned stern for a brief moment, but was then quickly replaced with a broad smile. "You're right. It's not like I'm against celebrating. And you did really well, Ranta."

"I sure did! That's because I'm amazing! Especially that cruel smile I had on my face when I stabbed it with my blade. Super Dread Knight-like!"

"Nuh-uh." Haruhiro waved him off. "You were just flinging that sword around in pure desperation."

"Idiot! I smashed its head in, piece of cake! Where were you looking?! Ohhh, right, over that way! Your sleepy eyes were too sleepy to notice!"

“Always saying the same things over and over. Sorry, but I’m not taking the bait every time.”

“Take it! Take it or it’ll make me really sad…”

Everyone laughed and savored the moment for a while. Then just as Manato had said, they returned to the search for their next target seriously. Things went well in Damroww’s Old Town area. Considering the days before this one, it was downright scary how smoothly things everything went.

By evening, they had killed four goblins including the sleeping one, and from the four goblin pouches had collected eight silvers, a glass-like stone, a black stone, a reddish stone, a number of bones and fangs, some sort of key-like object, a small cog, and some sort of metallic object. They sold everything except for the coins at the market in exchange for an additional two silvers and forty-five capas.

The earnings were split among the six of them resulting in one silver and seventy-four capas each with one capa leftover. Haruhiro used fifteen capas for food and lodging for the day so that meant he now had a total of three silvers and eight capas. If tomorrow went as smoothly, Haruhiro decided that he would buy a spare set of underwear and a small knife.

The next day, however, did not go as well. They had found a group of five goblins but, though Ranta wanted to engage, everyone decided to avoid them. Without the element of surprise on their side, they would struggle even against one opponent. Two was decidedly risky so five was out of the question.

Haruhiro thought that to be the correct decision, but evening was fast approaching and they hadn’t found any goblin groups of two or less. Finally, as they were returning to Altana they accidentally ran into a single goblin, which resulted in a sudden fight.

In the end, their earnings for the day amounted to one silver. Only a single silver…but thinking like in terms of “onlys” would only lead to trouble. They had earned a whole silver when they thought they were going to go back with absolutely nothing. Haruhiro accepted it as that. He would just have to earn a bit more before buying any personal necessities.

On their third day in Damroww’s Old Town area, they decided to make a basic

map of the place as they searched for their quarry. Well, it was Manato's idea and in order to draw the map, he had procured a small notebook and a brush. Manato insisted that if they were able to get an idea of the layout of the area and kept notes on where they spotted goblins, the information would be useful later on.

At any rate, it turned out that making the map as they wandered around the Old Town area was quite fun. "Let's take look around here…" or "we haven't been here yet…" They naturally memorized the roads and paths as they explored. They would grow nervous when they entered an area that wasn't on their map and conversely felt a sense of security in areas that had they had already mapped out.

They killed three goblins that day and after selling the loot, their earnings totaled to seventy-four capa each. It wasn't like that could put everyone in high spirits, however. The amount wasn't exactly enough to get excited over. However, Yume and Shihoru wanted to go shopping, so Haruhiro also went with them to the market.

He just happened to come across cotton underwear as he was looking around and even though he did his best to barter down the price, he still paid twenty-five capas for what looked to be like a used pair. Now that he had spare clothing, he also needed something to carry it in so out of necessity also ended up buying a backpack. Surprisingly, cheap used backpacks were fairly easy to find and Haruhiro had paid only thirty capas for one made of sturdy canvas. Compared to the underwear, he got the feeling that the backpack was the better deal.

When they returned to the lodge, everyone talked for a while about what shops offered what kinds of goods and what they all wanted to buy next. The more they talked, the more animated the conversation became and no one could really fall asleep. Suddenly, Ranta, who had been jabbering away excitedly just moments before began to snore. Mozgo soon followed suit.

Haruhiro too decided it was time to turn in. He was tired and feeling rather drowsy, but for some reason his consciousness refused to fall into the realm of sleep.

"Manato?" He called out tentatively and just as he thought, Manato too was still awake.

“Yes?” Came Manato’s immediate reply.

Although Haruhiro was the one who spoke up first, it wasn’t like he had anything in particular he wanted to talk about. No, there should have been plenty of things to say; however, none of them came immediately to mind. But saying nothing at all was odd, so he had to say something.

After a moment of panic—

“Thanks.” The word spilled almost unintentionally from Haruhiro’s mouth and he suddenly felt a bit embarrassed.

“What’s this all of a sudden?” Manato grinned. “I’m the one that’s grateful.”

“You’re… Grateful? Why?”

“For everyone. For you, being a real friend. I really am grateful. Saying it like this now, it might sound like lip service but I really mean it.”

“No, it doesn’t sound like lip service, but…” Haruhiro bit down on the inside of his cheek. “It’s just that, we’ve been depending on you this entire time. If it wasn’t for you, we… We might not even be around.”

“It’s the same for me. If it wasn’t for you and the others, I don’t know what would have happened to me. No matter how much I think about it, there’s no way I could have survived on my own.”

Haruhiro hesitated on what he wanted to say next, but he wasn’t any good at hiding his thoughts, nor could he hold it all in either. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but you could have made all the friends you wanted. You could have asked to join any party and they would have taken you.”

“A party of other Crimson Moon members? Honestly, I never really considered it. I don’t really like deferring to others and I don’t think I’d be good at taking orders from higher ups. Though I don’t recall anything I did before we all appeared in this place, so I don’t really know.”

And with a start, Haruhiro suddenly remembered. That feeling when he tried to recall something from his prior life. That feeling, as if the thing he was reaching for would suddenly disappear without a trace, just as he was about to grasp it. He

had been so preoccupied with everything else that he had forgotten all about that.

“Me too,” Haruhiro said. “I don’t remember anything either.”

“But I get the feeling…” and then Manato stopped, seeming a bit hesitant to go on. “That I wasn’t the type of person that had a lot of friends.”

“That’s…” What Haruhiro really wanted to say was, *No, you’re wrong*. But he fell silent. After all, he hadn’t known Manato before coming here. And it was the same vice versa.

Neither Haruhiro or Manato knew anything of themselves. The more he tried to think about it, the more confused he got. So he had decided that it was better not to think about it at all. None of it mattered now and it wasn’t like he could remember anything to begin with anyway. Not to mention they had plenty of other stuff to keep their minds occupied, the first and foremost being on earning enough money to live from day to day.

“It doesn’t matter who you were before,” Haruhiro said in the most cheerful tone he could manage. “No one’s gonna ask you about it either. What matters is you’re our teammate now. And leader too. We’d be in trouble if you weren’t.”

“I wouldn’t be able to do this without all of you either.”

Haruhiro nodded, though Manato’s bunk was beneath him and he couldn’t see it. Haruhiro needed to say something in reply. Anything. But even as Haruhiro searched for the words, Manato started chuckling softly.

“But isn’t it odd?” Manato continued. “Everything, that is. What are we doing, running around with swords and magic? It’s like something out of a game.”

“A game, huh?” Haruhiro blinked and tilted his head to one side. “Game. How so?”

Manato was silent in thought for a while. “I don’t know. But it’s like I said, it’s like a game. Or so I thought at the time.”

“No, now that you mention it, I think so too. A game… But what kind of game?”

A sense of discomfort fell over them. It was as if they had something caught in

their throats and couldn’t be dislodged. But it was definitely better to keep it sealed up inside. This wasn’t the time or place. Tomorrow they would head to Damroww again.

Haruhiro yawned. It seemed as if he would finally be able to fall asleep now.

Chapter 11: Don’t Go

“Ranta! One headed your way!” From Haruhiro, a warning.

“I know! No need to tell me!” From Ranta, an immediate reply.

Mogzo and Manato were positioned ahead, while Yume and Shihoru fought from range. One of the three goblins that Mogzo and Manato fought had slipped past them and gone for Yume and Shihoru. Ranta was closest to the one that broke through; though he and Haruhiro supported the front lines by staying behind and attacking enemies on the back and sides, they were there to defend the two in the back as well. Ranta moved to intercept.

Even though Ranta would still sometimes break formation to run off and do his own thing, their teamwork had improved in the thirteen days had passed since they first came to Damroww and started hunting goblins. And today he was right in step with the rest of them.

Ranta let out a battle cry, “[ANGER THRUST]!”, and attacked.

Or maybe he wasn’t. Ranta had thrust his longsword at the goblin with his newly learned skill, but from outside the technique’s range. It missed spectacularly.

“I missed?! It can’t possibly be a normal goblin!” Ranta declared.

“Of course it’s a normal goblin!” Haruhiro snapped, exchanging a glance with Manato.

Manato and Mogzo could definitely hold their own against two opponents, so Haruhiro rushed to maneuver himself to sneak up directly behind the goblin attacking Ranta with its rusty sword.

“Damn it!” Ranta cursed, looking at Haruhiro as he deflected the goblin’s blows.

Quit looking at me! Haruhiro thought even as tried to decide on a point to target.

It wasn’t just Ranta who had learned a new fighting technique. Everyone had returned to their guilds and came back with one new skill each. However, they

were all still at a level where they only understood how to use it in theory; none of them had the confidence to make practical use of their new techniques in a fight yet. But without at least trying to actively using their skills in a fight, they would never reach a practical level of proficiency.

Since he had paid a good amount of money to the guild to teach him the new technique, Haruhiro was determined to make use of it.

Easier said than done. The goblin had somehow suspected him and looked behind itself often, clumsily swinging its sword at Haruhiro in an attempt to thwart off any impending sneak attacks. He had a hard time finding any openings. If Ranta could just get its attention… but that was too much to expect out of a guy like him. Ranta wasn't the type to fight an enemy head on and Haruhiro was the same.

They were both afraid to face an enemy directly, preferring to attack from the back or at the very least from the side. Because of that, both Haruhiro and Ranta circled the goblin, trying to get into position behind it. The goblin, of course, didn't want any enemy at its back, so it circled too and soon, no one had any idea what was going on any more.

"Someone do something!" Yume drew her kukri and leapt at the goblin.

Taken by surprise, the goblin stopped moving for a fraction of a second, and Yume slashed with her kukri in a crisscross pattern. "[CROSS CUT]!"

The goblin shrieked and quickly backed away, bearing a shallow cut from shoulder to chest. It now had its back to Haruhiro.

Now! And even as he thought it, his body moved. In an instant, he had closed the gap between them and thrust his dagger into its back; [BACKSTAB]. The goblin donned only soft leather as armor, so Haruhiro's dagger went a good four inches into it. Grunting in effort, he pulled it back out and retreated just as the goblin twisted around.

The goblin coughed blood, looked like it was preparing to do something, then suddenly fell over, twitching. It was still alive, but finished. If not, then it would have kept fighting.

"Huh?" Haruhiro stared at the downed goblin. It stared back at him. "Did I…

stab it in a good spot? Or I guess a bad spot?”

“Gotta kill it!” Ranta jumped towards the goblin and slashed its neck with his longsword. “YESSS! Got my Vice!”

Yume narrowed her brows. “Yume thinks the same thing every time but Dread Knights really are savages.”

“I’m not a savage! I’m nobly cruel! Us Dread Knights do the bidding of Lord Skulheill. ‘Inhuman we are, heartless by far; we knights bloodless, tearless, our foes will blades mar.’”

“Oom rel eckt,” Shihoru chanted, drawing an elemental glyph with her staff. “Vel dash!”

Mages used the power of magical beings called elementals, and the shadow elemental that Shihoru had just summoned in front of her had the appearance of a frizzy black strand of seaweed. It was the [SHADOW ECHO] magic spell and it flew forward with a peculiar *voash!* sound.

Shihoru could have chosen to learn Alev, the magic of fire, Kanon, the magic of ice, or even Pfatlz, the magic of lightning. But instead she chose Das, the magic of shadow. Haruhiro had a distinct feeling that that was perhaps Shihoru’s personality starting to reveal itself.

The shadow elemental hit the goblin Manato was fighting square in the back of the head. However, it didn’t only affect its head; its entire body began to tremble.

“Gah! Gah!” The goblin cried in a strange voice.

[SHADOW ECHO] wasn’t magic that burned, froze, or shocked but rather did its damage through high frequency waves. As expected of Manato, he followed up with a blow using his short staff, then kicked the goblin down.

“[HATRED’S CUT]!” Ranta viciously attacked the fallen goblin.

Attacking something while it was already down was one of Ranta’s “special” abilities. Common sense would say that it wasn’t necessary to use their fighting techniques on already weakened and nearly finished enemies, but it was a fact that was lost on him. Ranta’s longsword slashed through the air and… didn’t

finish it. It had been deflected, having hit the gobin on the hard, boney side of its head. Ranta was immediately enraged.

“BASTARD!! Who do you think you are! Take this! And this! And this!” Ranta screamed, beating on it again and again.

While Ranta abused the dying goblin, Mogzo was still fighting the single one remaining. They had to finish it. But it didn’t seem necessary for Haruhiro to help. The goblin attacked with a wild cry, slashing at Mogzo with its rusted blade. Mogzo intercepted the attack perfectly, using his bastard sword to lock blades with it, and stopped the goblin’s movements.

It was here that Mogzo had the upper hand. He had a good amount of strength and had learned a follow-up technique. With a grunt, Mozgo spun the goblin’s sword around using his, then used the tip of it to cut into the goblin’s face; [SPIRAL SLASH]. Mogzo didn’t have speed, but he was fairly agile. The goblin winced and retreated back.

Haruhiro shouted in encouragement, “Go, Mogzo!” and Mogzo went.

He stepped forward, then slashed diagonally with all his strength, shouting. “THANKS!!”

Mogzo’s technique, [RAGE CLEAVE] was the most basic of basic skills taught to Warriors during after their initiation into the Warrior’s Guild. It looked like something that could have been mastered just by watching and imitating, but it wasn’t a skill that was easy to land. The reason why Mogzo shouted “thanks” when using [RAGE CLEAVE] was because it stood for “thanks for letting me kill you” amongst Warriors.

But behind such a seemingly innocuous word was a formidable amount of strength. Mozgo’s bastard sword had cut the goblin from the top of the shoulder to the middle of its chest. He spun around and the goblin was lifted into the air by the bastard sword, still stuck in its chest. Then, with a grunt of exertion, Mogzo hurled it away, sending it flying as he pulled the sword back out.

Ranta ran after the goblin, letting out a loud cry of triumph then starting hacking at the goblin with his long sword. Yume didn’t just think so; Ranta really was a savage. What he was doing was completely barbaric. And when he was done chopping at the goblin’s body, he used a knife to cut off one of its pointed ears.

“Three Vices in a row!” He laughed with glee. “That makes eleven total and an upgrade to my demon’s power! If it feels like it, it’ll whisper things in the enemy’s ears to distract it! Awesome!”

“What do you mean, ‘If it feels like it?'” Haruhiro sighed. “So a Dread Knight’s demon is useless in reality.”

“Hey! I heard that, Haruhiro!” Ranta shot back. “Don’t openly diss my Zodiac! I’ll have it curse you!”

Apparently ‘Zodiac’ was the name Ranta had given to his demon. Or was that its real name? Perhaps a pet name? Haruhiro didn’t know but it didn’t matter. It didn’t change the fact that it was useless.

“I’m right though. You can’t even summon it during the daytime,” Haruhiro said.

“Idiot! After I collect eleven Vices, it levels up! I can now summon it at sunset and sunrise!”

“We’ve returned to Altana by sunset and no one’s awake at sunrise.”

“That’s right. But.” Yume had joined in; her cheeks were puffed out in annoyance but her eyes glistened. A complicated expression to read. “Since it’s master is all bumble-brained, it’s probably kinda cute in that way too.”

“I’m not its master! Demons aren’t like pets! Zodiac sort of possesses me. It’s a demon after all!”

“So that means,” Shihoru said, chuckling softly and avoiding Ranta’s gaze, “that before you can use it to curse Haruhiro, you’ll be cursed yourself.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s right. Wait, WHAT?! Seriously?! Zodiac, is that true? Answer me, Zodiac! Oh, it’s still daytime so he can’t hear me…”

“Good work, everyone,” Manato said, looking at everyone with a smile. “Is anyone hurt? Doesn’t look like it but I’ll heal anyone who is. If everyone’s okay, then let’s take a look at the goblin pouches.”

“Me! Me me me! I’ll do it! Let me!” Ranta instantly volunteered.

Inside the three goblin pouches were seven silvers, two precious-looking stones, three fangs and bones which no one was sure could fetch a price or not, and a few pieces of junk that were definitely not worth anything. Depending on how much the stones would sell for, that meant that they had earned around ten silvers—or, at the very least, eight silvers.

They had left Altana at seven in the morning, had reached Damroww at about eight o'clock and now it was past noon. They proceeded to bury the goblin corpses in shallow graves then took a lunch break in an area a little ways away. Everyone had packed lunches consisting of bread, dried meat, and the like in their backpacks or bags and brought it with them. It was an enjoyable time for all.

"Need to give thanks." Yume cut a little a few thin strips off the dried meat she had packed and placed them on the ground. Closing her eyes and folding her hands together, she prayed. "Thanks, Eldritch. Here's an offering for your continued protection."

"Is praying and making offerings," Haruhiro asked, taking a bite of bread, "before each meal something that's required by the Hunter's Guild?" He had bought it from Tattan's Bakery just outside of Nishimachi. It was hard as rock, but cheap and tasted fine.

"Yes," Yume opened her eyes and turned her gaze towards Haruhiro. "The White Goddess Eldritch is a giant wolf and there's bad blood between her and the Black God Rigel, who is also a giant wolf. It's because of the protection of Eldritch that we can hunt and pass our days in safety."

"In other words, Hunters worship her, right?" Haruhiro said. "The Goddess Eldritch, that is. Is it really okay to pray so informally and offer so little?"

"It's fine," Yume laughed. "Eldritch is big-hearted; I don't think she'll get mad at something like that… Not that there's anything to get mad about."

"I think…" Shihoru was holding some sort of bagel or other donut-like bread delicately in her hands. "The Goddess Eldritch understands Yume's feelings. Or at least I believe so…"

Manato took a drink from a leather flask and nodded in agreement. "Sure, words and such are important, but even more important are the feelings behind the

words. When we Priests use light magic, the spell doesn't work if we get the incantation wrong, but that's not really the same as Yume's prayer to Eldritch."

"Yume is bursting full of feelings," Yume said, spreading out both arms wide. "When Yume sleeps at night, Eldritch comes to her in her dreams. Yume asked if she could ride Eldritch and Eldritch said yes. Yume climbed onto her back and Eldritch ran so fast! It was incredible!"

"So," Ranta said, frowning as he chewed noisy on a strip of jerky, "where's the punchline? I've been listening to that silly story this entire time waiting for the punchline, so where is it? If you haven't prepared a good punchline, I swear I'll punch you!"

"Punchline?" Yume blinked and tilted her head to one side. "There's no punchline."

"What!?" Ranta tipped himself over dramatically. "Idiot! What's the point of such a long story without a punchline?! What are you going to do when I drown in a downward spiral of shattered expectations?"

"How is that a bad thing?" Shihoru said in a tiny voice. "If you just go drown and die."

"Hey!" Ranta pointed his finger at Shihoru. "Hey! Hey! I heard you! I heard what you said, Shihoru! You want me to die!"

"I was just saying. How is it a bad thing if you were to die by drowning?"

"If you suggest the cause of death it doesn't matter if you do it politely! You're the worst! The worst human being ever! The worst rotten villainess in all of history!"

"Just ignore him, Shihoru," Yume said, hugging Shihoru and gently petting her on the head. "No need to listen to anything the lowest of lowlifes says. Shihoru hasn't done anything wrong. It's the lowlife who's bad. He's so low that he can't even be considered human, really."

"I am human!"

"A curly-haired human?" Haruhiro said and Ranta affirmed with, "Yes, curly-

haired…” Then glared at Haruhiro as he caught on.

“Curly hair has nothing to do with it!” Ranta said, pulling at said hair. “In fact, a curly-haired person is a good person! People without curly hair aren’t people at all, so there!”

“In that case,” Mogzo swallowed a mouthful of bread the size of a fist. “It’s okay if I’m not human.”

“Yume too,” Yume said.

“…Me too,” Shihoru added.

“Same here,” Haruhiro agreed.

“Hold on,” Manato said, his expression almost, but not quite, solemn. “Let’s think about this rationally. Is curly hair really the problem? I don’t think it is. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with curly hair in of itself. In fact, curly hair might even be the victim here…”

“Huh?” Ranta pulled on his hair. “Victim? My hair? So does that mean I’m the criminal?! And it’s because of me that curly hair has become a bad thing!?”

“Ranta, I’m just joking.”

“God damn it, Manato! You’ve always got that grin on your face so I can’t tell when you’re joking or being serious! You’re a masked black-bellied traitor!”

“H-h-he’s not!” Shihoru suddenly stood up, her face a bright red. She looked so outraged that steam seemed to rise from her head. “Manato’s not black-bellied or a traitor! You take that back right now!”

Ranta flinched. “H-hey, I have a point though, right? If you think about it, if I have to take it, I have the right to dish some out too.”

“Take it back!” Shihoru demanded.

“Fine, fine! I get it. I’ll take it back. Manato’s doesn’t have a black belly. His belly is white. I see it in the baths every day, so I know it’s white. It’s white, that Manato’s belly. Seriously. White. For a guy. Even for a girl, it’d be a high level

of whiteness.”

“White…” Shihoru swayed back and forth a little. “Manato’s… belly… baths…”

“Whiter than a girl, huh,” Manato lifted up his Priest’s outer robes and then the shirt underneath. “I don’t really think so, but Haruhiro, is my belly that white?”

“Er, well…” Haruhiro looked from Shihoru to Manato, then to Shihoru, then to Manato again.

Indeed his abdomen was white, but Shihoru’s skin was fairer. But that wasn’t really the point. Haruhiro already somewhat suspected, but now he knew for sure. Shihoru liked Manato. Was Manato pretending that he hadn’t noticed? If so, then Haruhiro felt bad for her; however, he also had a feeling that wasn’t the case.

“I guess it’s pretty white, now that you mention it. Yeah, white. And your skin is very smooth too,” Haruhiro said.

“Smooth… skin…” She looked as if she was going to fall over at any moment. “Skin… smooth…”

“Shihoru… are you okay?” Yume moved to support the unsteady Shihoru. “It’s really not good to fantasize too much all at once. It’s better to fantasize a little bit at a time. Shihoru? Shihoru?”

Shihoru sighed heavily and leaned against Yume, in a complete daze.

Oops, Haruhiro thought. *Maybe I overdid it.…* But at that moment, he suddenly noticed how interesting, that is to say cute, Shihoru was.

Ranta scoffed in apparent disgust and turned away. He began to eat his lunch, putting on an air of general disinterest. Was it possible that Ranta liked Shihoru? And Shihoru seemed to be interested in Manato, so Ranta was upset over that?

If so, Ranta should rethink a great many things. He had done nothing so far that would make a girl like him. In fact everything he’d been doing seemed to make girls hate him.

“We’ve really become a good team,” Manato whispered.

“Oh?” Haruhiro replied.

“We’re able to take on three goblins at a time with no problems now and no one was hurt, meaning we were able to defeat them quite easily. Yume is much better handling a kukri than a bow; in fact, she’s quite good with it. If we plan carefully, we can probably take on four at a time.”

“I see…” Haruhiro thought about it for a moment.

Mogzo and Manato could take one each while he, Ranta, and Yume would handle the other two. Shihoru could immediately disable one with her [SHADOW ECHO] skill and if they could finish it off quickly, then he had a feeling four was manageable.

“Yeah, we can probably handle four,” Haruhiro agreed.

“Mogzo’s become indispensible to us. He’s so big that just his presence in a fight intimidates our opponents. He also handles that blade with a fair amount of accuracy, so when he swings it, hits tend to land.”

“I think so too,” Haruhiro said. “Mogzo’s swordplay is pretty skillful.”

Mogzo swallowed another mouthful of bread. “R-really? I don’t know about that, but I do like handling jobs that require precision.”

“That doesn’t suit you!” Ranta burst out angrily for no apparent reason, making Mogzo flinch. “Or at least that’s what I think.”

Haruhiro glared mildly at Ranta. “It’s a good thing. Mogzo isn’t just some good for nothing juvenile delinquent, unlike someone else here.”

“Oh?” Ranta shot back. “Are you talking ’bout me? You know my nickname is ‘Precision Whirlwind Machine,’ right?”

Yume, who was patting Shihoru reassuringly, peered at Ranta coldly. “Yume is sure no one has ever called Ranta that, not even once.”

“Ranta’s amazing,” Manato’s solemn expression indicated that he wasn’t joking

around this time. “He’s always on the offensive, attacking all out. He’s not afraid of failing, so he will probably master skills faster than anyone. Everyone else, myself included, we’re averse to risk. If it wasn’t for Ranta, we’d never be able to keep advancing.”

“Is that so?” Ranta’s expression looked uncertain. “In that case, my nickname’s ‘Advancement Cyclone Machine’?”

“What happened to ‘Precision Whirlwind Machine’?” Haruhiro remarked as the straight-man.

“And Shihoru…” Manato paused. He must be carefully considering Shihoru’s thoughts, Haruhiro guessed. “Shihoru has a good understanding of the bigger picture. The majority of Das spells confuse or stun enemies and support the team in fights. She chose to learn shadow magic so she can help us in a pinch. Right, Shihoru?”

Shihoru looked awestruck with surprise for a moment, then gave a silent but decisive nod. Haruhiro thought it was rather fitting of Shihoru to choose the rather specialized Das over easier to understand fire, ice, or lighting magic. Maybe it didn’t exactly suit her, but Shihoru didn’t simply pick the one she liked most, she had actually thought things out for the sake of the team before choosing.

I’m such an idiot. Haruhiro thought. *I don’t really know her at all.*

Manato shifted his gaze to Yume next. “Yume is brave. She probably has more courage than any of us. As a healer, I sometimes wish that she would be more careful, but if anything happens, Yume wouldn’t hesitate to jump in to help.”

“Yume wouldn’t?” Yume pointed to herself. Her expression softened. “Yume doesn’t really feel scared in fights, but Yume’s never been called brave before. Maybe you’re right. Sorry for not being good with a bow, even though Yume’s a Hunter.”

“Everyone has areas where they’re weak and things that they can’t do well,” Manato said, more to himself than anyone else. “There’s times when any one of those things might become fatal flaws for one lone person, but we’re a team. We cover each other’s weaknesses.”

“True,” Yume nodded several times. “Very true. From now on, Yume will try her brestest to not drag the team down.”

Ranta scoffed. “You mean ‘bestest’ as in ‘best’. Not ‘brestest’, right? ‘Brestest’ sounds like some sort of special type of breasts.”

Yume ran her hands across her chest. “Yume wonders what having brestest breasts would be like. They’re probably a completely different type from Yume’s small ones.”

It was too good of an opportunity not to interject, so Haruhiro said, “Maybe it’s a sub-type.”

Yume looked at Haruhiro, her expression completely serious. “Haru, you really think so?”

“Err… maybe. Who knows?”

“What kind of sub-type? Brestest. It does have a cute ring to it.”

“B-Br…” Mogzo started to say. Everyone’s attention suddenly turned to him. Sweat suddenly started to run down his forehead and he wiped it away with one hand. “U-uh… Nevermind. Really, nevermind.”

“Now I’m curious,” Shihoru said, eyes never leaving Mogzo.

Mogzo turned his own gaze to the ground and after a while, finally said, “S-sorry.”

With his apology, no one else pursued it any further but… what in the world was it that he wanted to say? Shihoru wasn’t the only one who was curious..

The chit-chat went on for a while longer as they finished their lunches. Then the afternoon portion of their goblin search began. It was only after they had started off that Haruhiro realized something. Manato had plenty of praise for everyone else, but didn’t say a word about Haruhiro. Maybe Manato had just forgotten about him. Or maybe there was nothing about himself that was worth praising.

Did Manato have a low opinion of him? Even though they often spoke, did Manato see him as nothing more than someone make small talk with? It made

him quite depressed to think so. But it wasn't like he could go up to Manato now and ask, 'Hey, what about me?' Fishing for compliments was just too pathetic.

Forget it, he told himself.

Manato had either just forgotten or the direction of the conversation had changed before Manato had gotten to him. It had to be one of those two reasons, Haruhiro decided. He felt a little, just a tiny bit, better.

Concentrate. He had to concentrate on the task at hand.

Haruhiro raised a hand, a signal for the team to halt. "Something's there…"

Reconnaissance went first so everyone quickly concealed themselves behind cover while Haruhiro, as usual, went ahead alone. Ranta would also come along on rare occasions, but to be honest, it was easier when he was just by himself and the only person he had to worry about was himself.

Of course he was doing his best not to make any noise as he moved, but once he had enough money, the Thief class skill [STEALTH WALK] would be one that he wanted to learn. There was definitely some sort of trick behind being able to move silently and he wanted to learn it. He wanted Master Barbara to teach him.

The goblins were inside a crumbling two-story building made of stone. The balcony-like second floor was basically non-existent and a portion of the walls on the first floor had collapsed. On the second floor was a goblin in plate-armor with a sword strapped to its back. A second goblin was sitting on the ground on the first floor. It was big for a goblin.

Normal goblins were about the height of human children and usually just around four feet. Any goblin that reached four and a half feet was considered a giant for the species. That goblin sitting on the first floor, though, was somehow different. It was hard to tell from that distance, but it seemed to be one or two sizes larger than the goblin on the second floor.

It was the first time Haruhiro had seen a goblin like that, and he couldn't quite see what kind of weapon it carried, though it was wearing chainmail armor. Haruhiro continued to scout the areas around the building, but no other goblins were around—so then it was only the plate-armored goblin and the giant. Haruhiro returned to the others.

“Bad news,” he reported. “There’s only two but one is huge. Almost the same height as us.”

Manato’s eyes widened ever so slightly. “A hobgoblin. A sub-species of goblin but bigger and stronger than a normal goblin. They’re savage but not very intelligent. Goblins use them as servants sometimes.”

Ranta licked his lips. “If it has a servant, it must be pretty wealthy. It’s definitely gotta be carrying a bunch of valuables.”

Haruhiro scratched his chin with the tip of a finger. “You may be right. It had plate armor on and the hobgoblin was wearing chainmail armor, complete with a helm. That helm might even be big enough for one of us to use.”

Mogzo sighed loudly. For Warriors, the ones who had to face their opponents head on in fights, protective gear was especially important. However, armor was expensive. Brand new gear was out of the question, so the only other options were only to chance upon used armor that fitted properly, which was extremely rare, or go to a blacksmith to get the size of used armor adjusted. Because of that, everyone, Mogzo included, were still using the second-hand gear their guilds had provided.

“Two goblins.” Manato cast his gaze downwards, deep in thought.

Yume’s eyes were slightly skyward as she said, “If it’s just two, Yume thinks we could take them.”

“If I can bind one with my magic,” Shihoru said, refreshing her grip on her staff. “It should be easy after that.”

“Yume will also try to attack with her bow. If Yume misses it’ll still get the gobbie’s attention so Yume also thinks we can manage.”

Manato glanced at each of his teammates in turn. Maybe it was because they had been complimented by Manato earlier, but everyone else’s morale was high and they were eager to engage. The tension in the air was thicker than usual. Haruhiro himself didn’t particularly share in that feeling, but he didn’t want to put a damper on everyone’s excitement either.

“We going to go for it?” he asked, to which Manato nodded.

“Let’s do it.”

A battle plan was quickly devised. Haruhito, Yume, and Shihoru would go in first, attacking from a distance. After the enemy realized they were under attack, Mogzo and Manato would take up positions at the front. While Mogzo took on the hobgoblin, Manato would engage the plate-armored goblin. Haruhiro, Ranta, and Yume would press the attack from the sides while Shihoru supported with magic from afar.

The entire team formed a circle facing each other and stacked hands at the center.

“Fight!” Manato called in a low voice, to which the rest responded as one with, “All or nothing!” in equally soft voices.

They had started that little pre-fight ritual some time ago, but inwardly Haruhiro always found it a little odd. “Why the words ‘Fight! All or nothing!’?” he thought out loud.

Shihoru tilted her head to one side. “I don’t know… But it feels familiar for some reason.”

“Yume has that feeling too,” Yume said. “But Yume doesn’t know why. Strange.”

Haruhiro led the way with Yume and Shihoru towards the two-storied building. Manato, Mogzo, and Ranta followed from about twenty to twenty-five feet behind. Yume’s bow had longer range, but Shihoru’s magic had a range of only about thirty-feet. Could they get within thirty feet of the goblins undetected?

It wasn’t going to be easy, and perhaps impossible even, due to a wall that fenced off the building. There was a good fifty feet of open space between the wall and the building itself. As soon as they crossed the wall, the goblins were sure to notice them.

Haruhiro drew close to Shihoru. The faint scent of something sweet filled his nose. Lips right next to her ear, he whispered, “Shihoru, are you wearing perfume?”

“…Huh? What are you talking about?” said Shihoru.

“Err, nevermind. Sorry. It’s a little far, but can you hit the goblin from here?”

“I’m not really sure… but I’ll try.”

Shihoru pressed a hand to her chest and took a calm, deep breath. Yume had her bow up and arrow nocked and ready. Neither of the goblins were looking in their direction. Yume and Shihoru simultaneously stepped halfway out from behind the cover of the wall, and Shihoru drew an elemental glyph with her staff.

“Oom rel eckt vel dash!”

A frizzy, black, ball-like shadow elemental burst from the tip of her staff with a *voash!* at the same time Yume released her arrow. The arrow flew over the plate-armored goblin’s head, surprising it, while the shadow elemental hit the hobgoblin on its left arm. The hobgoblin grunted as its entire body began to tremble.

The plate-armored goblin turned to look in their direction.

“They’ve noticed us!” Haruhiro shouted.

“Let’s go!” Manato commanded.

The hobgoblin picked up an enormous spiked club near its feet that it had put down earlier and got up clumsily. The [SHADOW ECHO] spell had done its job. The plate-armored goblin was also holding something in its hands. What was it? Some sort of weapon? It looked sturdily-built, with something like a miniature bow fixed on the end. And the plate-armored goblin was pointing it straight at Haruhiro and the others with him.

Haruhiro quickly grabbed Yume’s and Shihoru’s shoulders and opened his mouth to warn them to get back in cover. But before the words came out, an arrow came flying at them. Yume and Shihoru fell backwards, pulled down by Haruhiro. He grunted and quickly scrambled back as well.

Then pain hit him. His right arm. An arrow. An arrow was sticking out from his right arm. *It hurts. It hurts, it hurts, IT HURTS.* He bent down, crouched on his heels. It hurt when he moved, it hurt when he stood still. He was in so much pain, he could hardly breathe.

Shihoru let out a gasp of shock when she saw.

“Haru!” Yume placed a gentle hand on his back.

Haruhiro groaned in pain. *Don’t touch me. Please don’t touch me.* Because it hurt. This was bad. Was he going to die? He was going to die, wasn’t he? Death. No way. He didn’t want to die. But the pain. THE PAIN. *Help me… Someone…* This was bad. He wasn’t going to make it like this.

“Haruhiro!”

It was Manato. Manato had come for him. And without any warning whatsoever, he pulled the arrow out of Haruhiro’s arm. As the arrow came out, Haruhiro felt as if a huge chunk of something else had been yanked out with it. Blood was flowing from the wound fast and thick. *Manato, I’m going to die. You’re going to kill me, doing something like that…*

But Manato paid no attention as he promptly formed a hexagon with his hand and began chanting, “O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous… [CURE].”

The light that spilled from Manato’s hand began to bind up Haruhiro’s wound. Though it was probably healing, the pain wasn’t fading at all. Haruhiro gasped and gasped and gasped again. It hurt so badly he couldn’t exhale.

Finally, the pain began to recede. He was finally able to breathe normally once more, and he tentatively touched his right arm; it was soaked in blood, but no longer hurt.

“Manato!” It was Ranta calling. “Hurry! I can’t stall it forever!”

“Will you be okay?!” Manato shouted at Haruhiro, and Haruhiro began a nod, but Manato was already moving away.

Oh, right. While Manato was healing Haruhiro, the others were still fighting. Haruhiro glanced at the building and saw that Mogzo was battling the hobgoblin while Ranta and Yume were fiercely engaged with the plate-armored goblin. Did Manato intend to go reinforce Ranta and Yume? Shihoru was hitting the hobgoblin with [MAGIC MISSILE], but it was barely even affecting it.

Haruhiro got back to his feet in a panic. If Manato was going to join Ranta and Yume, they could probably take on the plate-armored goblin. But something had to be done about the hobgoblin.

“Hang in there, Mogzo!” Haruhiro shouted encouragingly, while getting into position at the hobgoblin’s back.

The hobgoblin must have been only focused on Mogzo, because it paid zero attention to Haruhiro. If that was the case, then it should have been easy to land [BACKSTAB] but for some reason, he couldn’t get close enough to use the skill at all. The hobgoblin was a little taller than Haruhiro, but not as tall as Mogzo, though it was much more broadly built.

The spiked club it wielded was made of wood, but it was heavy and thick. If it landed a hit with it, even the chainmail armored Mogzo wouldn’t be able to just shrug it off. On top of that, the chainmail that the hobgoblin was wearing was a problem. It wasn’t just its upper body that was protected; the chainmail shirt was linked to chainmail pants, and its head was also protected by a helm. There was no place for Haruhiro to target; its entire body was covered in armor.

“THANKS!!” Mogzo shouted the Warrior’s [RAGE CLEAVE] battle cry.

A sudden cheer almost erupted from Haruhiro’s mouth, but died just as quickly. Mogzo’s bastard sword had hit the goblin square on its left shoulder, but the blow barely made it flinch and its counterattack was instant. Mogzo was barely able to deflect the incoming club in time. No, in fact Mogzo didn’t deflect the attack; the blow had caused him to stumble backwards. His fighting stance had been crushed. This was bad. Mogzo was going to go down.

Haruhiro rammed himself into the hobgoblin’s back in a full body tackle, thrusting his dagger into it at the same time. The knife made a horrible noise at it scraped against metal. It was no use. His weapon couldn’t penetrate the armor. Haruhiro did, however, manage to take its attention off Mogzo, and now the hobgoblin was swinging its club at him. He jumped, dodging the incoming blow —not just barely, but with room to spare.

Still, this was bad. He was frightened. He felt like all his internal organs were collapsing in on themselves. He felt as if he were half dead already. Not able to help it, he backed away.

“I-I can’t do this…” He whispered to himself.

“Oom rel eckt vel dash!” Shihoru chanted. The shadow elemental hit the hobgoblin’s side and it began to tremble violently.

Mogzo brought down his bastard sword on the momentarily shaking and immobilized hobgoblin’s head. Sparks flew as the sword connected with its helm and put a large dent in it. It staggered.

“Now!” Haruhiro shouted, rushing towards it with a dropkick.

The hobgoblin was scary, but if they could bring it to the ground… Before Haruhiro could get back up on his feet, Manato shouted his name. “Haruhiro, over here! Ranta’s… !”

“What?!” Haruhiro saw that Ranta was down, blood running profusely from his neck. “He got cut in the neck!?”

While Manato tended to Ranta’s wound, Yume was forced to face the plate-armored goblin alone. The goblin was slashing its sword at Yume, forcing her to scramble back. This was bad. Haruhiro faced the goblin and forced himself between it and Yume.

“Oy, gobbie! Over here!”

Just as Haruhiro had intended, the plate-armored goblin’s attention was now wholly on him. But that also meant that he was the one who would have to trade blows with it now. No, there was actually no way he could do that. The sword that the plate-armored goblin was swinging around was about the same length as Ranta’s longsword. He dodged its attacks. Block, parry, and dodge—that was all that he could manage.

This goblin was unlike any of the other goblins he’d faced before. It was quick and agile and Haruhiro had a feeling that it had also had formal training with weapons, as it wielded its sword quite adroitly. Defending himself only with a dagger, if he made one careless move… he didn’t know what would happen.

Was Mogzo doing okay alone? Haruhiro was worried, but didn’t have the luxury of taking his eyes off the plate-armored goblin to look.

“[SWEEPING SLASH]!” Yume attacked the plate-armored goblin from behind.

It was a powerful sideways sweeping attack using the kukri, but the goblin had read her movements. It spun to meet her attack then countered with a blow that stripped the kukri from Yume’s hand. The plate-armored goblin prepared to finish her with a final follow-up blow.

“I won’t let you!” Haruhiro threw himself at it, but the goblin had predicted his movements as well.

It turned towards Haruhiro, sword raised. *No way!* Haruhiro thought. He brought his dagger up to meet the incoming attack, but he couldn’t stop the other’s blade. The goblin’s sword slid along his dagger’s edge with the shriek of metal on metal. Not even the cross-guard would stop it.

The goblin’s sword bit into his right arm, making him shout in pain. Haruhiro’s dagger fell from his hands. The goblin moved in, pressing the attack. *I’m going to be cut down*, Haruhiro thought.

“[ANGER THRUST]!” It was Ranta. The plate-armored goblin’s attack missed Haruhiro by a hairsbreadth.

Ranta had jumped in from the side, thrusting the tip of his sword at the goblin. It ducked, avoided Ranta’s attack, and without even stopping to take a breath, counterattacked. Ranta retreated straight back to the side.

“Shit! Quit fucking around, you rich bastard!” Ranta cursed.

Ranta’s face was pallid and he was sweating profusely. His wound had been healed but that didn’t mean the blood he had lost had been put back in. He did save Haruhiro, however. Though barely, Haruhiro was still alive. His arm hurt terribly. The goblin’s sword had cut deep. The pain made it impossible to move his right arm, so he picked up his dagger with his left.

“Haruhiro!” Manato had come running and immediately prepared a light magic spell. “O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous… [CURE].”

Haruhiro gritted his teeth against the pain. As the wound healed, his eyes darted about the area. Mogzo was somehow managing to hold his own against the hobgoblin’s attacks, but not without difficulty. He was beginning to become

unsteady on his feet. Shihoru was crouched, probably exhausted from overusing her magic. It wasn't possible to expect more help from her.

He had a feeling that although clumsily, Ranta would be able to keep dodging the plate-armored goblin's attacks for a little longer. Yume's arm had been cut somewhere and was bleeding.

"Done," Manato said. Haruhiro touched his arm to confirm it had healed and turned his gaze towards Yume.

"Yume! Over here! Manato will heal you!" Haruhiro shouted.

"Yume's fine!" Came Yume's reply. "Yume can still keep going!"

"Haruhiro, switch with her! Yume, come here!" Manato ordered.

But even as he moved to obey, Haruhiro was filled with uncertainty. He noticed that Manato's breathing had become a bit ragged. Had he been using his magic too much? Haruhiro's class was Thief, so he had no idea about the rules of magic. It was a matter of whose judgment he trusted more, his own or Manato's. Of course he trusted Manato more. So it was fine. He should still be okay. There shouldn't have even been any question in the first place.

Haruhiro switched places with Yume. He wanted to put pressure on the plate-armored goblin but hesitation made him unable to do anything. If he attacked, he was afraid that he would be counterattacked. Was Ranta thinking the same? That goblin was too skilled of a fighter. There were no holes in its defense to exploit.

At some point as well, the goblin had donned a helm. It was now helmed and plate-armored. No way. Even if Haruhiro could land a hit with his dagger, it would only be deflected by the armor. The same held true for Ranta's longsword. What about Mogzo's bastard sword? But Mogzo had his hands full with the hobgoblin, he couldn't take two at once.

Checkmate, Haruhiro suddenly thought. They had been checkmated. They couldn't win this fight. There was no way in hell they could win. But he had already known. He had realized that they had lost a while ago. What would happen if they lost? If they were defeated? Would they die? Would all of them die?

Haruhiro glanced over at Manato, who was nearly finishing tending Yume's wound. They both came over to Haruhiro's side.

"Haruhiro, help Mogzo!" Manato said and Haruhiro nodded reflexively.

He wasn't sure if it was a good idea to leave them, but Mogzo did need help. Haruhiro moved to take up position at the hobgoblin's back.

It was then that it happened. The hobgoblin let out a monstrous war cry and swung its spiked club down at Mogzo. He brought his bastard up to block, but he couldn't stop the hobgoblin's attack.

The hobgoblin struck again and again, raining blows down on Mogzo's sword. The club was made of wood, but it didn't show any signs of breaking. Mogzo, at his limits, grabbed his sword with both hands, one at the hilt and one near the tip, to fend off the hobgoblin's hits. The attacks were overwhelming and soon, he was forced down to one knee. Blood was running down his head from where one of the spikes on the club had struck him.

The hobgoblin kicked Mogzo to the ground and started to bear down on him. If Haruhiro let that happen then… this was bad. Very bad. Without any self-consideration, Haruhiro latched himself into the hobgoblin's back. He would have liked to be able to pin down its arms as well, but it was just not possible.

The hobgoblin struggled to shake Haruhiro off; Haruhiro clung desperately on. It let out a long howl of rage.

"That's it, Haruhiro! Keep it distracted!" Manato shouted as he healed Mogzo.

No way. It was not possible for Haruhiro hold on for much longer. The hobgoblin elbowed him in the ribs so hard that it didn't just hurt—it almost made Haruhiro lose consciousness. *This is bad.* If he passed out, then it would be over for him. If he got thrown off he would die. He would definitely die.

It was then that something truly frightening happened. He had no idea what had actually transpired, but he was thrown off and had hit the ground on his back. The hobgoblin kicked him before he could get up, sending him tumbling. He couldn't breathe.

"H-hel…." He croaked. *Help me…* He didn't know who he was turning to for

help, but it came.

Manato landed [SMASH] on the hobgoblin's head with his short staff. The hobgoblin had a helm to protect it from the blow, but even so Manato's technique seemed like it had done enough give the hobgoblin a minor concussion.

"Hurry!" Manato shouted. "Haruhiro, get up! Run! Everyone run!"

Yes, Haruhiro thought as he jumped up to his feet. *Run, yes.* They had no choice but to flee. He turned to go, then stopped suddenly. "What about you?!"

Manato was attempting to retreat even as he continued to attack the hobgoblin. "Of course I'm going! Hurry and run!"

Mogzo, whose head wound had just been healed, focused his sights on the plate-armored goblin and shouted, "THANKS!" as he attacked with [RAGE CLEAVE]. He missed, but it did make the plate-armored goblin shrink back.

Ranta and Yume turned their backs to flee, and Shihoru was also running away. The plate-armored goblin shrieked and slashed Mogzo across the back with its sword, but thanks to his chainmail, he didn't suffer any injuries. Haruhiro was right behind them, turning to look back as he ran.

"Manato, everyone's clear!" he cried. "Get outta there!"

"I know!" came Manato's reply, as he hopped back and paid the pursuing hobgoblin two successive hits to its chest.

The hobgoblin faltered and Manato swiftly turned and ran. The plate-armored goblin sheathed the sword it was using, pulled out another, then swiftly gave chase. They weren't out of danger yet. Haruhiro focused on keeping going straight ahead. At that moment, the plate-armored goblin threw something at them. It spun around and around in the air before it seemed to hit Manato in the back.

A grunt escaped Manato's lips and he seemed to lurch forward.

"Manato!" Haruhiro cried.

Manato replied instantly even as he regained his balance. “I’m fine!”

His feet were now solidly back under him, so the injury was probably minor. Both the hobgoblin and the plate-armored goblin were right on their tails now. They had to run. Just run away. It was a good thing they had made the maps, because knowledge of Damroww’s layout now came in handy. They didn’t get lost as they fled, and were able to avoid areas frequented by other goblins.

Haruhiro and the others kept running. They ran even as their breathing became ragged, even as they became exhausted, and even as if they felt like they were about to drop dead. They ran on even after they could no longer see their pursuers. The first to stop running was Manato.

No. No, he hadn’t stopped running. He had suddenly fallen to the ground.

“M-Ma–” Haruhiro tried to called Manato’s name, but no words came out.

His back. Manato’s back. Something was sticking out of it. Something bladed. The blade was curved. It looked like a throwing knife. No one said a word. Everyone was looking at him, but no one said a word. No one had any words. What could they say?

Manato gasped for breath, trying to get back onto his feet. He couldn’t. The best he could do was roll to his side. “I think… it’s… okay… to go…”

“Manato!” Haruhiro dropped to his knees by Manato’s side. Was it okay to touch him? Was it not? He didn’t know. “Manato… your wound… magic! Use your magic to heal yourself…”

“R-right.” His right hand moved to touch his forehead, then fell limp back to the ground as if the strength to keep it raised was drained from it. “My magic… I can’t… use it…”

“Don’t talk!” Ranta shouted. “Just take it easy, don’t try to talk! What do we do!?” he asked the others.

Shihoru staggered to Manato’s side and dropped to the ground opposite of Haruhiro. She reached out with her hand, and just as trembling fingers made contact with the throwing knife lodged in his back, she drew them back sharply. Her face was drained of all color.

Manato face too, wasn't just white, it was deathly pale. Mogzo's entire body was still and rigid as stone, like a large statue.

"W-wha…" Yume was rifling her hair, making a tangled mess of it. "What do we do?"

"What… what do you mean what…" Haruhiro felt like something was being ripped out from his chest.

What were they going to do? Think! What could they do? There had to be something! They couldn't just sit there! *Manato, please tell us… Please… Tell us what to do… Manato….* But the breathing of the person he pleaded for was shallow, raspy.

"Y-you're going to be okay," Haruhiro said. "You're going to be fine, so hang in here… Hang in there, okay?"

Manato looked at Haruhiro. "…Haru… hiro…"

"What is it? Manato, what is it?"

"I… I'm… sorry…"

"What? Why? For what?"

"I… can't… everyone… Haru… hiro… please…"

"Please? Please what? What do you want me to do? No… no, don't say stuff like that, Manato…"

"I… can't see… Is… everyone… here?"

"We're here! We're all here! Manato, everyone's here, so don't go!"

Manato seemed to exhale deeply as if sighing.

"No! Don't go! Manato! You can't go! Don't go, Manato! Please… don't go…"

He inhaled, then exhaled once more. And at that moment, his eyes seemed to glaze over as if turned into glass.

Shihoru placed her hand on his chest. “His heart’s stopped…”

“C-CPR! Give him CPR!” Ranta yelled in what Haruhiro admitted was a good moment of insight.

They started CPR as if it would solve everything, everyone talking all at once about what to do. They pulled the knife out and rolled him to his back, giving him CPR and mouth-to-mouth. Minutes passed, tens of minutes passed, maybe even more than one hour passed as they tried to revive him.

“S-should… shouldn’t we stop?” Mogzo looked as if he was about to cry. “Poor Manato… We shouldn’t do that to him anymore…”

“Then what do you want us to do?!” Haruhiro snapped angrily, before getting a grip on himself. He continued in a softer tone. “…What should we do? We can’t just leave him here. We can’t just leave Manato here.”

“Magic.” Shihoru looked up. Her eyes were swollen and bloodshot. “There may be a way to save him with magic. Light magic can heal.”

“That’s right,” Yume said, nodding vigorously. “Shihoru’s right. Magic will work. It’s got to work. We can take him to the Priests guild and their temple.”

“Temple of the god Luminous?” Ranta wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. “Me go there? You’re saying for a servant of the Dark God Skulheill to go into enemy territory?”

Mogzo lifted Manato up into his arms. “I’ll take him.”

“Let’s go,” said Haruhiro with a nod.

Ranta and Haruhiro both offered to take turns with Mogzo and help to carry Manato, but Mogzo brushed them off. He alone carried Manato all the way back to the north end of Altana until they reached the temple of the god Luminous. The moment they set foot inside the temple, they were stopped by a group of men all dressed in the same colored robes, white lined with blue, as Manato was.

There was one amongst them that seemed to recognize Manato. Master Honnen seemed to be his name, according to what the others were calling him. The master came to them straight away. He was built like a monolith, resembling a Warrior more than a Priest.

The first thing that came out of his mouth was, “What has happened?”

His voice was rather distinctive and it reminded Haruhiro of something Manato had once said, about his guild master's voice being loud enough to hurt his ears. As the memory came flooding back, Haruhiro couldn't hold himself back anymore. He threw himself down on his knees before Master Honnen.

"Please! Please help Manato! I'll do anything, anything you want! Please save him!" Haruhiro begged.

"Foolish boy!" Master Honnen thundered. "Even the bright shining god of light, Luminous, cannot bring a person back from the dead! Manato, you fool! One so young with such a promising future is rarely seen. We took you in with such high hopes, taught you with such care, yet you have thrown your life away!"

"You bastard!" Ranta made to grab Master Honnen. Yume stopped him, interjecting, "No, don't!"

Ranta didn't fight her, perhaps because he saw the stream of tears that flowed freely from Master Honnen's eyes. Shihoru sunk down to the cold temple floor; Mogzo stood frozen, though he still held Manato in his arms.

"The only thing we can do for him," came Master Honnen's voice, rock steady, though the tears had yet to cease, "is bury him properly. Here on the frontier, those who are not given a proper burial come under the Curse of the Deathless King and become his servants. At the most, the transformation into a zombie takes five days. Some have turned in as little as three."

Suddenly, and for some reason, Haruhiro wanted to laugh, even though he knew this wasn't any time to be laughing. "So you want to cremate him?" Haruhiro asked.

"Yes. The crematoria where we burn the bodies is located just outside of Altana. After the body is purified by flame to prevent it from falling under the curse, the remains are buried at the top of the hill."

"One more thing," said Haruhiro, "if I may ask."

"What is it?"

"Will it cost money?"

“I will pay for it, if you cannot afford it.”

“No.” Haruhiro sighed. It was a deep, deep sigh, filled with anger, even though being angry was by itself useless and dumb. “We’ll pay. It’s not like we don’t have money. Even if we don’t have enough, we’ll figure something out. Manato was more than just our friend; he was our teammate, and precious companion. We owe him at least that much.”

Chapter 12: Where to Turn Now?

The place where they dug a grave and buried Manato's bones, wrapped in white cloth, would be better described as at the middle of the hill rather than the top. A slab of stone they had carried up with them was placed over the grave. It had Manato's name inscribed into it, along with the token red-painted crescent moon. Even if they were trainees, they were still members of the reserve force and Manato's grave was marked accordingly.

Other graves bearing the crimson crescent moon symbol, some old enough that the paint was faded, could be found all around them. No small number of Crimson Moon soldiers called this hill their final resting place. At the very top of the hill was a tower that soared into the sky. It was a loathsome thing.

That tower was where Haruhiro and the others had emerged. How long ago was that? Probably less than a month, but it seemed much longer. Had it really been from that tower? From all appearances, it had no doors or entryways. Where had they exited? Haruhiro didn't know, nor did he care.

The cremation had cost fifty capas, the grave on the hill another fifty. Everything for the funeral had come to one silver. One silver for the death of a human being. No more than one silver. Haruhiro had paid it with his own money for the time being, but was that really okay? Manato had had seven silvers and twenty-one capas in savings. His clothes were burned with his body, but there was his short staff, his backpack, and other personal possessions. What where they going to do with those? It annoyed Haruhiro to have to think about something like that.

Manato was gone. He was really gone. It hadn't even been a full day. They took him to the crematoria yesterday evening and were told by a worker there to return at midnight. After Manato's remains were returned to them, they were unsure of what to do next, so they returned to the Priests at the temple of Luminous. Master Honnen offered to let them store the remains there overnight, but there was no way they could just leave Manato there.

What ultimately ended up happening was that Manato was placed at a corner of the temple grounds. Haruhiro and the others settled in a circle around him, remaining until dawn. No one slept. Maybe they did drift off now and then, but

no one slept properly. Was that the reason why everyone seemed to be in such a daze now? Even as they all sat in front of Manato's grave, none of it seemed real.

Shihoru, exhausted from crying, had both hands on the ground in order to keep herself propped up. Just sitting there seemed to take a tremendous amount of effort. Yume was staring up at the skies, now mockingly sunny and clear, perhaps watching the birds fly by. Mogzo's large frame seemed to have shrunken and his expression was vacant. Then there was Ranta.

Why had he been staying silent this entire time? If he wouldn't talk, then who would? Fine. Haruhiro would break the silence then.

"It's weird," he started, plucking at the grass. "It doesn't make any sense. I'm not the only one who thinks so, right?"

Ranta looked in his direction, but didn't say a word. His expression said that he was currently void of intelligent thoughts.

"Manato said once," Haruhiro continued, tossing the blades of grass away. "It's like we're in a game. I thought so too back then, but what kind of game is this? I don't know. It's not a game. It's not a game at all… I don't get it. Damn it… DAMN IT."

In the end, Haruhiro had no idea what he really wanted to say.

What time was it now? Way past noon, maybe even close to sunset. In Altana, bells rang every two hours to indicate the time. They rang once at six in the morning, twice at eight, three times at ten, and so on. How many bells did he hear last? He couldn't remember.

Ranta got up, slowly, deliberately. "I'm heading out."

"…Where to?" Yume asked.

Ranta gave a short laugh, not caring about how he came across to her. "Does it matter? It's no use sitting here forever. There's nothing we can do about it now."

"Idiot!" Yume snapped.

Ranta didn’t return the insult. It wasn’t like him at all. He left. Haruhiro went after him, with Mogzo following, but Haruhiro stopped once to look back. Yume had her arms around Shihoru’s shoulders; she was looking in their direction, and Haruhiro was too far away to tell if she was nodding or shaking her head. He had a feeling though, that she was trying to tell him that the two of them would remain there. Was Shihoru going to be okay? She was in shock, probably more so than Haruhiro. After all, Shihoru definitely had a crush on him.

Ranta seemed as if he intended to return to Altana, and Haruhiro considered asking him where he was going, but changed his mind. It didn’t matter. The bell rang seven times before they had reached Kaen Road in the northern part of the city. So it was already eight o’clock in the evening and, as usual for that time of night, the streets were full of people.

Ranta was making to enter a large building. The signboard outside read: Sherry’s Tavern. Haruhiro recognized the name as the place where Crimson Moon members gathered and, although he had passed by the place before, he had never gone in. Manato would go to Sherry’s now and then to get information, but everyone had just left him to it alone. Everyone had just left Manato to do everything.

And I was the same, Haruhiro thought. *I just tagged along with him and did whatever he said to do.*

Sherry’s was a large, spacious tavern, its entirety dimly lit by lamps that hung off the ceiling. It had two floors, though half of the second was actually the stairwell. It wasn’t crowded yet—less than half of the usual number of clientele were present—but there were still more than a hundred people there. The room was filled with chattering voices, loud laughter, and occasional shouts of anger, mixed with the lively voices of the serving girls.

Ranta found an empty table in a corner on the first floor and took a seat. Haruhiro and Mogzo followed suit at the same table. When a serving girl finally came, Ranta promptly raised three fingers and said, “Three beers.”

He hadn’t bothered to ask either Haruhiro or Mogzo what they wanted to drink.

“I don’t really want to drink,” Haruhiro protested.

“What do you want then? Milk?” Ranta crossed his arms over his chest and

tapped his foot on the ground. “That’s dumb. This is a tavern. A TAVERN. At taverns, people drink alcohol.”

“B-but…” Mogzo hunched over, his head seemingly shrinking into his shoulders. “Drinking at a time like this?”

“Idiot! It’s because of times like this you drink,” Ranta sniffed, rubbing his eyes. “Manato. That bastard used to come here to drink right? But he’s… You know, he’s… It’s not like we’re here in his place but…”

“Right,” Haruhiro said, resting his elbows on the table, head hung low. “You’re right.”

The serving girl returned with their beers and after paying her, the three of them clanked their tankards together and drank. Maybe it was because they were all thirsty, but the bitter brew tasted great. Did Manato order the beer they were drinking now when he came here? Did he like the taste of it?

Perhaps it was the alcohol, but Haruhiro’s face grew hot and his mind went vacant. Ranta’s and Mogzo’s faces too were red. Ranta suddenly slammed his earthenware tankard on the table.

“This is the worst. It really is the fucking worst. I quit. I don’t want to do this anymore. I’m not kidding. It’s not like I wanted to do this to begin with, but I did reluctantly go along. You two were the same, right? What the hell is a Warrior? A Thief? A Dread Knight? A… a Priest? I’ve had enough. I quit. I quit it all. From today, I quit forever.”

“Quit?” Haruhiro ground his teeth together. “What are you going to do if you quit?”

“I ain’t gonna do anything,” Ranta replied. “Nothing wrong with that. Do I have to do something? There’s no rule making me do anything. Even if there was, I don’t give a shit.”

“It’s not about giving a shit, it’s about not having a choice. That’s how all of us ended up here.”

“I didn’t know that!”

“If you didn’t know, then what were you thinking?!”

“How was I supposed to know?!”

“P-please,” Mogzo put himself between Haruhiro and Ranta. “The both of you. Please don’t fight.”

“Shut up!” Ranta shoved Mogzo off roughly. “Even if did keep going, how would we do it?! What are we gonna do from now on?! Manato’s not here anymore!”

“I know that! It’s not like I need you to tell me!” Haruhiro yelled.

“Then answer me! When you were injured in that fight, it was Manato that came and saved your ass! What are you going to do now that he’s not here anymore, huh?! ANSWER ME!”

“I–”

“In fact, it was because you got injured so many times that Manato used up all his magic and things turned out like this!”

“…Ranta, you… Is that what you really think?”

“Am I wrong?! Is what I’m saying wrong?!”

“No… you’re not wrong.”

“It’s all because you suck at fighting! You always got wounded and dragged us down! It’s all your fault!”

“STOP IT!” An angry voice roared. Mogzo. For a moment, the entire tavern went quiet. Mogzo’s eyebrows were knit tightly together in rage. Haruhiro was taken aback. He couldn’t believe that Mogzo was capable of becoming so angry. “This isn’t the time to be fighting with each other! Calm down, both of you!”

Haruhiro shifted in his chair. “…Sorry.”

“You too,” Ranta shrugged. “You’re getting way too angry. You need to calm down too.”

When Mogzo glared at him, Ranta shrunk back. “Sorry! I’ll be more careful from now on! Really, I mean it! There’s no need to be so mad…”

“Actually,” Mogzo took a gulp of beer and relaxed his shoulders. “What we’re going to do from now on is a good question.”

Haruhiro rubbed the back of his neck. “I know, but I kinda don’t want to think about that right now. Not that I really can think straight right now either.”

“I’ll say one thing,” Ranta banged on the table with his tankard. “I’m not being a pessimist or anything, but I’ve thought it through and it’s impossible to keep doing this without him. Just try counting up how many times he’s saved our asses and you’ll understand.”

“So,” Haruhiro glanced sidelong at Ranta. “We do nothing? Isn’t that just as impossible? What are we going to do about money? It costs money to eat and have a roof over our heads at night. Are we going to look for other jobs?”

Ranta frowned, resting his chin in his palms. “That’s one option.”

“It is for me. But you’re a Dread Knight. Your guild won’t just let you leave to take up another job,” Haruhiro pointed out.

Ranta’s jaw dropped.

“Or did you forget?”

“I didn’t forget! But… but once a Dread Knight, always a Dread Knight? FUCK! Why did I become a Dread Knight!?”

Mogzo let out a long, heavy sigh. “Other work…”

“Hey!” The voice that greeted them was one Haruhiro recalled hearing before. When he looked over in that direction, the person it belonged to was also familiar. He waved as he approached. “Hey, hey, hey! It’s you guys! I don’t remember your names, but long time no see! How’re you doing? Staying young?”

“Kikkawa…” Haruhiro blinked a few times.

There was no mistaking it with that happy-go-lucky face of his. It was Happy-Go-Lucky Kikkawa. But he looked different now, or at least his appearance did. He donned armor reinforced with metal plating and had a sword with a fancy pommel strapped to his waist. From his gear, it looked like he was a Warrior.

“Yo yo!” Kikkawa’s grin stretched from ear to ear and he raised his hand for high-fives from Haruhiro and the others. Haruhiro high-fived him automatically.

Without asking, Kikkawa planted himself in a chair between Haruhiro and Mogzo. “Beers, beers! Are beers for everyone okay? Beers!” He called the serving girls and ordered. “So! So so so! How’s everything? How’s everything going? How are you guys? Bringing in lots of money? What was that place called… Damroww! You guys are working in that area, right? I heard! I heard! A little while ago, I met Manato here so I heard it from him! Tell me! Tell me! How’s it been going?”

Kikkawa was as annoyingly upbeat as ever. A bit overwhelmed, Haruhiro replied honestly, “…It’s not been going well.” Perhaps a bit too honestly. “Actually, Manato’s… Manato’s a little… well, not a little, but…”

“What?!” Kikkawa tilted himself backwards. “What what what?! No! No way! No waaaaaaaaaaaay! H-h-he’s GOING TO GET MARRIED!?”

“No way!” Haruhiro said, smacking Kikkawa on the back of the head like a true straight-man. Kikkawa yelped, his eyes seeming to bulge out of their sockets, but Haruhiro didn’t regret hitting him a bit.

“…That’s not it,” Ranta said, his expression sour. “He’s dead. Got killed yesterday.”

“Whoa…” Kikkawa rubbed the back of his head at the same time as he tugged on his chin. “I’m sorry. Sorry. Really, really sorry, okay? I didn’t mean anything by it. It’s just that… I never thought that he would die. I always thought that he was a guy that could get things done, but of a different sort from that Renji. Or maybe he wasn’t different. I don’t really get them, those kinds of people, that is, but… Hey! Our drinks are here! Alright! Chee–I guess this really isn’t the time for cheers. Well, let’s just drink then.”

Haruhiro craned his neck left then right. He suddenly felt extremely exhausted. “You look like you’re doing okay, Kikkawa. Did you find a party to join?”

“Yep! Almost right after I left you guys, I joined a guy named Tokimune’s team. A good guy, but kinda dimwitted. Is he here? I’ll introduce you…”

“No, don’t worry about it.”

“I see. I guess there’s no hurry. Manato was a Priest right? The backbone of your party? The death rates for Priests are not low, comparatively. They make for easy targets.”

Mogzo slowly shifted his gaze to Kikkawa. “Really?”

“Isn’t that obvious?” Kikkawa gulped enthusiastically from his tankard. “What were we talking about? Oh right, Priests. Enemies know that Priests are a party’s healer so it makes sense to kill them first. And Warriors like me? We put ourselves between them and the enemy in order to protect the Priest. That’s how the course of a fight usually goes. The basic course, anyway.”

Mogzo buried his face in his hands. “…I didn’t protect him at all. All I did was ask him to help me all the time…”

Kikkawa patted Mogzo on the shoulder in sympathy, as an old friend would. Except that he wasn’t. “Don’t kick yourself over it. Everyone fails at some point or another. Mistakes and errors are how we discover the right path. It’s okay, everything will be okay.”

“But…” Mogzo shook his head. “Manato isn’t coming back.”

“True,” Kikkawa raised both hands in acquiescence. “That’s true, but the way I see it, you gotta keep going forward. You might think that I can only say stuff like that because I’ve never had a teammate get killed, but on the other hand, I can say that because I’ve never had a teammate killed. Wait. Was that the same thing? Whatever, but for now, don’t look back, just keep looking to what’s ahead.”

Haruhiro’s gaze fell to the earthenware tankards resting in a line on the table. Was Kikkawa saying that he shouldn’t be looking downwards like this? There was no reason to heed a word of anything Kikkawa had said, but what would Manato think? Manato didn’t have to use words to tell any of them which direction to face. He created an atmosphere where everyone would naturally look forward to the future.

“Even if we were to go on,” Ranta began, half muttering. “It doesn’t matter what’s ahead. We don’t have a Priest anymore. Our party.”

Kikkawa looked at them, his expression as if saying *so what?* “So how about searching? For another Priest. Wait. I know what you want to say. ‘There’s no Priest who would want to join a trainee’s party.’ Am I right? By the way, I’m no longer a trainee. I’ve bought my Crimson Moon contract. I’m a full member now. Want to see? Want me to show you?”

“Not really,” Haruhiro sighed. “But you just said it yourself. No Priest is going to want to join our party.”

“Actually… there is someone…” Kikkawa said.

“What?”

“I know a lot of people and a lot of people know me. Crimson Moon members, that is. There’s someone. One person I know. Someone even you guys might be able to recruit.”

Ranta leaned forward with interest. “Who?”

“But before that!” Kikkawa looked at each of them in turn. “What were your names again? Sorry! I’ve been trying to remember, but I don’t recall at all. Could you tell me again?”

Chapter 13: Crucial Piece

It would be morning soon. It didn't matter if someone died; morning came just as it always did.

It was about eight o'clock and everyone was gathered at Altana's northern gate. The echoes of the eight o'clock bell had yet to fade, but Ranta was there shouting at the top of his lungs.

"…So there you have it!" he cried, sounding just a tad distressed. "Everyone, I would like to introduce to you our new friend! Please give a round of applause to Mary, our new Priest!"

Haruhiro and Mogzo clapped hesitantly, but Yume and Shihoru were obviously dismayed. They had been unceremoniously woken up that morning and dragged out, so Haruhiro understood their confusion. It would have been odd if they weren't, at least a little.

However, they weren't even bothering to greet the young woman, Mary, even though it was their first meeting. To be fair though, from outward appearances, Mary seemed cold, almost hostile, and very… obstinate. Not exactly the approachable type. Haruhiro wished, though, that they would at least put a little more effort in doing so.

Haruhiro was beginning to see why Kikkawa said that even their party would be able to recruit her.

Ranta gestured once more to Mary. "A round of applause for Mary!"

"N-nice to meet you," Shihoru stammered, with a slight bow.

Yume, too, bent forward a little. "W-welcome."

Mary didn't respond in kind. Her eyes narrowed to slits as she peered unblinkingly at Yume and Shihoru. Haruhiro, too, had been subject to the scrutiny of those same eyes last night.

There was one thing, though, that he couldn't stand. She was beautiful. Not just

normal, run-of-the-mill beautiful either. No; her big eyes, her curving lips, her shaped nose and the sheen of her straight hair could not be called merely “pretty”. Her features surpassed anything of this world. It was like she wasn’t even human. What was it exactly that made Haruhiro think so?

It was the combination, the balance. The smallness of her head, her style. Just one look and anyone would say that she was something different. She had an air about her. It had made Haruhiro extremely nervous the first time he stood before her.

Then he noticed. Her gaze was cold. Ice cold. Haruhiro had a feeling then and there that this person was trouble. She was the type who you did all you could to avoid coming close to; beauty to be appreciated from a distance. Unfortunately, the present circumstances required that they recruit her for the team.

According to Kikkawa, there was no small amount of Crimson Moon members without parties, but few of them were Priests. Skilled Priests were always in demand and few in number, so teams competed to recruit them. Moreover, Haruhiro and the others were still trainees, so they weren't even in the running compared to veteran parties like Kikkawa's. Even Team Renji, formed at about the same time, would be considered superior.

In other words, Haruhiro's group ranked the lowest of low within the Crimson Moon organization. They were so low they might as well have been slithering around on their bellies, so not in a position to pick and choose. Whether it was Mary or whoever else, they were thankful just to have a Priest willing to join their team.

Mary tucked away a loose strand of hair and shifted her gaze to Haruhiro. "Is this everyone?"

"Er…" Haruhiro quickly looked down.

He didn't want her to accidently catch him staring at her, but he couldn't help it. It wasn't fair. She was a Priest, so her clothes were white, lined with blue. They looked stylish on her and weren't all that tight, but all the curves of her body were still plainly visible.

Recovering, Haruhiro continued. "Yeah, counting you, six total."

"I see," she said, her expression just a touch disdainful. "Fine. As long as I get my cut, I don't care. Where are we going? Damroww?"

"Y-yeah…" Haruhiro looked at his companions. The general mood wasn't good at all. Was everything really going to be okay? "…I think."

"You think?" Mary said. "Be certain."

“D-Damroww. We’ll head to Damroww’s Old Town. Look for goblins… we don’t really know any other creatures.”

“Fine. Go promptly then. I will follow.”

“Umm…” Ranta said, purposely avoiding looking right at Mary. “Can you talk a little less, uhh… and act a little more… you know…”

Mary’s icy eyes seemed to pierce right through him. “What?”

“N-nevermind! S-sorry… just forget I said anything…” Ranta quickly replied.

Mary was scary. She was terrifying. She was beyond terrifying. She was… just as Kikkawa had said.

According to him, Mary had a number of nicknames. “Wicked Mary” and “Scary Mary” were just a few of them. Mary was almost constantly without a party and would often receive invitations to join from parties lacking a Priest. Mary never refused any invitations, but she also never stayed in one party for any extended period of time. She didn’t think of others as real people, and also, her reliability as a Priest was questionable.

No one had anything good to say about her. Sure, she was a beauty, but she lacked anything that resembled team spirit. And apparently, though she accepted invitations to parties quick enough, invitations for a date were rejected at superluminal velocities.

Kikkawa knew from personal experience, having been rejected himself. *The attempt must have been valiant though. A real gentleman, that Kikkawa,* Haruhiro thought sarcastically.

In the more or less hour it took for them to reach Damroww, no one said a single word. It was an awkward, uncomfortable silence. Mogzo and even Ranta were just plain terrified of Mary. Yume and Shihoru were doubtful, distrustful, and therefore disconcerted. They both seemed confused and angry at the same time. Haruhiro had no idea how to react.

Maybe they were upset because of Mary’s attitude. Maybe they were upset because of a new Priest joining so soon after Manato died. And actually, a small part of Haruhiro did think that maybe it would have been at least somewhat

better to have waited a little more. On top of that, they hadn't discussed the decision to invite Mary with Yume or Shihoru. The three of them had just decided at the tavern, right there and then.

They shouldn't have, though. They should have taken their time and thought things over. If it had been Manato, he wouldn't have let things turn out like this.

Damroww. The place where Manato had died. It was too soon to be coming back here. Much too soon.

"What if we bump into *them* again?" Haruhiro whispered to Ranta.

Ranta replied in a dark tone. "Then we fight them. I want to slice off the ears of both the armored goblin and hobgoblin bastards and offer them on Skulheill's altar. I won't be satisfied 'til I do."

"But…" Shihoru began coolly. "We can't win. Not like we are now."

Ranta scoffed. "I don't care. I'm going to fight anyways."

"And what if Ranta dies?" Yume's voice quavered slightly. "If Ranta dies, Ranta loses everything."

Mogzo gave a vigorous nod. "Don't die. I don't want anyone else to die."

"Are we going or not?" Mary said, frowning. "If we're going let's go. If we're not going, fine. Whichever it is, be quick about it."

Ranta stuck his tongue out at her. Then he said, "Be quick about it, Haruhiro."

"Right…" Haruhiro replied.

Who was this team's leader now anyway? Mogzo wasn't the type that could inspire others to follow him. Yume and Shihoru were the same. *Me, then?* Haruhiro thought. *I'm no leader. I can't make any decisions on my own.*

But Manato had asked him to. *In the end, he was calling me by my name, saying 'please.' He was trying to say to me, 'Please take care of everyone.' But Manato, I can't.* He couldn't do it. Haruhiro wasn't like him.

“L-let’s go,” Haruhiro said to everyone nonetheless. Even a phrase as simple as that and his voice was shaky, small. He sounded pitiful, even to himself.

Using the map they had been making, they searched in areas where goblins were known to frequent. Now that Manato was gone, taking on three at a time seemed unwise. It was just their luck that only in times like this all they could find were goblin groups of three or four. By the time they stopped for lunch just past noon, everyone was full of impatience, irritation, and weariness. Haruhiro had developed a stomachache.

They couldn’t keep going like this, and it wasn’t just about money either. Haruhiro had already inwardly made his decision. They had a Priest, after all, so if there were no groups of two, they would go after groups of up to three. Somehow, they would make it work.

Their chance came soon afterwards. Three goblins standing around a fire pit in an open area enclosed by a fallen wall. One was donning chainmail armor and carried a short spear, but the other two were dressed in plain clothing. One had a hatchet at its belt, the other a short sword. The spear-goblin was bigger than the others and seemed to be the one in charge, with the hatchet-goblin and sword-goblin being subordinates.

They seemed manageable enough.

“Yume and Shihoru will attack the spear-goblin first. Me, Yume, Ranta, and Mary will keep the hatchet-goblin and sword-goblin busy while Mogzo and Shihoru take down the spear-goblin. If it puts up a fight, either me or Ranta will go help. If we can take down the spear-goblin, the others should be easy.”

“Wait.” Mary’s voice was edged with steel. “You’re telling me to fight the goblin?”

“Huh?” Haruhiro wavered. “Is that… a bad thing? Why?”

“I don’t fight in the front. I’m a Priest—you should know this already.”

“Hey!” Ranta was getting riled, but he held it back. “Lady!”

Mary’s eyes, sharp as daggers, flicked to Ranta filled with near killing intent. “‘Lady’?”

“N-not ‘Lady’ but… It’s not right! I can call you whatever I want!”

“No, you can’t.”

“…M-Mary. Mary, then.” Ranta’s veins were bulging in rage. “That thing you Priests carry, you don’t lug it around for nothing, right? That staff-like thing. It’s for hitting, right? Or do you just carry it around for decoration?”

Mary stood tall, gazing down on Ranta from her full height. “For decoration.”

“You bastard!”

“Bastard?”

“M-Mary. You… you’re… it’s… it’s that… FUCK. I don’t know. Whatever. Do what you want.”

“I always do what I want. I don’t need you to tell me.”

“Right.” Ranta laughed fakely. “Right. I knew that. Damn it… who does she think she is….”

“Could you not talk so filthily all the time? It dirties my ears.” Despite how it sounded, it was definitely not a request.

“I’m sorry! My bad! If it bothers you that much then just cover those ears of yours!”

“Why should I even have to bother doing something so annoying?”

“Okay, okay,” Haruhiro said, rubbing the back of his neck. “We get it. Mary will stay back, act as backup. Stick with Shihoru. Shihoru is our Mage so she’s never in the front. That fixes it, right?”

Mary tossed Haruhiro a glance that seemed to cut him down. “It’s only proper, isn’t it?”

“Right, okay. Let’s go with that.” Haruhiro was as relieved as he was angry.

Why did they have to go that far to make her happy? She had only joined their team today. Though it was true that she had more field experience, wasn’t she

just equal with the rest of them? But Haruhiro didn't have the guts to say so much to her face. She terrified him.

Usually now what they would do was gather in a circle, and then everyone would put their hands in the center for their pre-fight ritual, but this time it didn't seem right.

"Yume, Shihoru, go ahead," Haruhiro said instead.

Yume and Shihoru nodded silently. Were they so upset that they didn't want to speak? Both of their expressions told him that they were not in good moods. He wished they would stop it. Their moods were making him irritable in turn. He couldn't do anything about it, but he wished that they made more of an effort to understand how he was feeling, too.

He knew though, that if he spoke up about it, there wouldn't be an end to it, so he had shoved everything deep down inside of himself. Yume and Shihoru did what they were told and went on ahead. Shihoru should be in range soon. When she was, Haruhiro signaled her to attack.

Shihoru spoke the incantation in a low, lifeless tone as she drew the elemental glyph with her staff. Yume nocked an arrow onto her bow and pulled the string back. The shadow elemental shot out from Shihoru's staff and hit the spear-goblin right in the chest. Its entire body started trembling uncontrollably, making it drop its spear.

Yume's arrow missed, flying massively wide of its target.

"Not even close." Mary's voice was a low whisper, but it traveled well enough for Yume to hear. Yume's grip tightened on her bow.

"Don't worry about it!" Haruhiro said to Yume, drawing his dagger.

Mogzo and Ranta were already moving to engage. Time for him to hurry up and move too. They would take down these goblins. They had to win. If they lost, they might die. They couldn't afford to lose.

Mozgo was prevented from reaching the spear-goblin by the hatchet-goblin and the sword-goblin. Meanwhile, the spear-goblin was recovering from Shihoru's attack. Ranta moved in to engage the hatchet-goblin, trying to get him off

Mogzo, but the sword-goblin proved more of a problem. Mogzo couldn’t get away.

Haruhiro went in. “[BACKSTAB]!”

He used the technique the moment he was in position behind the sword-goblin, but it turned around at the last moment and Haruhiro’s dagger grazed it in the ribs. The goblin lunged with its sword at Haruhiro, shrieking in rage.

“Whoa!” Haruhiro stepped back, dodged to the right, and retreated. The sword-goblin’s movements were nimble, quick, and Mogzo probably would have had a hard time fighting it. But now, Mogzo’s way had been cleared. The spear-goblin came lunging at him.

Mogzo deflected the goblin’s spear with his bastard sword. They were now all fighting one-on-one. No, Yume was coming to Haruhiro’s aid. She held her kukri slanted, and slashed down at the sword-goblin.

“[CROSS CUT]!” She yelled.

The sword-goblin bent low and sprung back a good two meters, avoiding her attack. They came across these types of goblins from time to time. Small, light, and agile, they didn’t have much offensive power, but their evasion skills were off the charts; they were very difficult to bring down. These lightweight-class goblins were a pain to deal with.

“Oom rel eckt vel dash!” Shihoru had used [SHADOW ECHO] and the shadow elemental flew straight at the spear-goblin.

The goblin dodged it. However, Mogzo was right there with the follow-up, already swinging his bastard sword. He did it too soon though and his attack sliced nothing but air. The spear-goblin launched a series of rapid thrusts with its weapon at Mogzo, who had no choice but to back away. It was a short spear, but even so, its length was longer than the goblin’s height. Mogzo couldn’t close in enough to get back into the range of his own weapon.

Now that Haruhiro thought about it, this was the first time they had ever faced an opponent that wielded a spear. Inexperience. It was one of the reasons why Mogzo was having such a hard time with his opponent.

“Gah!” Ranta let out a shout of pain as he jumped back. His left calf had been cut, and bled.

The hatchet-goblin was crouched low and swung its weapon in a circular motion, aiming below its opponent’s waists. This fighting style was also difficult to deal with.

“Yume, I got this one!” Haruhiro said. “Take Ranta’s place with the hatchet-goblin! Ranta, go get healed!”

“No,” came Mary’s immediate reply.

“No?! What, why?!” Haruhiro exclaimed.

“It’s not an injury that requires immediate attention. Suck it up.”

“Baaaaaaastard!!!” Ranta attacked the hatchet-goblin furiously. “Bastard! Bastard! Bastard! Just because you’re hot doesn’t mean you can do whatever you want! Fuck you! Fuck you! FUCK YOU!!!”

Haruhiro and Yume chased the lightweight, sword-goblin all around the place but they couldn’t catch it. “Ranta! Does your leg hurt?!”

“OF COURSE IT HURTS!” Ranta shouted. Ranta brought his long sword down on the hatchet-goblin in a diagonal slash. “[HATRED’S CUT]!” The hatchet-goblin avoided the attack easily. “Look at how much I’m bleeding! How can this NOT hurt?! IT HURTS GOD DAMN IT!!”

Yume fell on her back as the sword-goblin swept out her feet from under her. This was bad. Yume was going to be cut down. Haruhiro threw himself between Yume and the goblin, dagger raised, intending to use his own body as a shield. Rather than face Haruhiro, the sword-goblin jumped backwards.

In a series of short, quick hops, it had retreated beyond the range of Haruhiro’s dagger.

“Quit wasting time,” Mary said softly.

And whose fault is it that we can’t finish the fight quickly? Haruhiro thought. If it had been Manato instead of Mary with them, they would have been able to take

on these three goblins with ease. Manato had been just as much of a tank as Mogzo; he was also their healer, their strategist, and their leader. If Manato was here, it was like having a hundred more people on their team in a fight. That may have been an over-exaggeration, but to Haruhiro, that's how much different it felt.

Manato wasn't like you, Haruhiro thought bitterly at Mary. *A Priest who refuses to do anything but heal, then refuses to heal, too… The difference is so big, you don't even compare.*

But Manato wasn't here anymore. He wasn't anywhere now. They had lost him.

What are we going to do, Manato?

Chapter 14: Silver’s Gold Coin

“I CAN’T TAKE IT ANYMORE!”

Ranta slammed his earthenware tankard onto the table.

“Ranta…” Mogzo mumbled. “You’re going to break it.”

“Shut up! I got it under control!” Ranta yelled. “What ’bout you, huh?! Doesn’t she piss you off?!”

Mogzo muttered something noncommittal.

“Admit it! That girl pisses you off!” Ranta ranted. “What the hell is with that attitude?! It’s been a couple of days now and she’s not even *trying* to get along with us! Haruhiro!”

“What?” Haruhiro replied.

“Even you think so! Don’t lie! Hey! I’m talking to you! Tell me what you really think!”

“I already told you several times.” Haruhiro drank from his own beer tankard. “I just put up with it. But I don’t not agree with you.”

“Quit using hard to understand sentences! You’re just defending her because she’s hot!”

“That’s got nothing to do with it.”

“You’re too soft on her! You’re soft on all girls! Way too soft!”

“I don’t do it on purpose, but admit it, even you can’t stand up to her. You talk about her like this behind her back, but you don’t say anything to her face.”

“As if I could!” Ranta flopped forward, face down onto the tabletop. “She scares the hell outta me! Those eyes, that voice, fucking scary! It makes me want to cry! …Is it okay to cry?”

Mogzo patted him gently on the shoulder. “Don’t cry, Ranta…”

“Quit it!” Ranta slapped Mogzo’s hand away. “Don’t try to console a man! A man doesn’t want to be consoled! It’s just too pathetic! I’m a man! A manly man! I’m a… a…”

Haruhiro sighed. “Just leave him be, Mogzo. He’s just being his usual self. There’ll be no end to it if you bother with him every time.”

Ever since Mary joined the party, Ranta, Mogzo, and Haruhiro had made it a habit to visit Sherry’s after they got back from Damroww’s Old Town. It wasn’t like any of them wanted to drink, or anything, but without the distraction at the end of the day, no one could sleep well and no one wanted to return to working the next day.

Beers were discounted three capas a tankard for contracted Crimson Moon members, but being mere trainees, they paid the full four. Though Haruhiro had only one tankard every time—two tankards at most—he still realized that it was a waste of money.

Their earnings were only half—or actually closer to a third—of what they had been when Manato had been with them. Now, days when everyone would pocket only one silver each weren’t rare. Haruhiro knew he should be saving up his money. He knew, but…

Counting the amount deposited at Yorozu’s, all the money Haruhiro had came to just over seventeen silvers. Crimson Moon contracts cost twenty silvers to purchase, so he needed just a little more before he could become a full member. That’d didn’t necessarily mean that he could purchase one the moment he hit twenty silvers, though. Without having at least thirty silvers on hand, paying twenty in one lump sum wasn’t wise. It would have been nice, though, if Commander Bri let them pay a little at a time.

“Crimson Moon. Reserve force soldiers…” Haruhiro whispered, looking around the tavern.

Everyone in the room was outfitted with better equipment than them. Haruhiro was sure that most wore their precious armor into the tavern to keep it from getting stolen while they drank, and many of them had expensive-looking swords strapped to their belts. Not to mention stylish garments under that armor,

too. The difference between them and Haruhiro's group was overwhelmingly obvious.

"I know." Ranta slouched awkwardly forward, until his chin rested on the edge of the table. "No need to tell me, Haruhiro. It's the contract, right? But it's not like our goal is to buy Crimson Moon contracts anymore. 'Becoming a full member or not, I don't care anymore' is what you're thinking."

"I don't know what I think," Haruhiro said, "about having words put into my mouth by you."

"Rude. You asking for a beatdown?"

"I apologize."

"Don't just apologize like that. The argument's never gonna get anywhere that way. Fight me more, stupid."

"Annoying brat."

"B-but…" Mogzo heaved a deep sigh. "I get the sense we've lost sight of our goal. It wasn't like this before."

"Maybe so, then," said Ranta. He tilted his head sideways so that one side of his cheek was flat on the table. "Things have changed this much, just because Manato's gone."

Suddenly Haruhiro found himself incensed. Failing to resist, he snapped, "Quit saying 'just because' like it's no big deal. It is a big deal."

"Yeah." Ranta nodded sideways. "My bad."

"…It's not like you to apologize right away."

"Annoying brat."

Haruhiro wanted to smack him, but decided that a guy like Ranta wasn't worth the effort of lifting his fist, of even curling it.

"Goals, huh." Haruhiro glanced around the tavern once more. His eyes suddenly

locked on one certain person, and there was a sudden tightening in his chest. “Renji…”

While Haruhiro and the others occupied a table in a dimly lit corner of the first floor, Team Renji sat around a nice, brightly lit table near the serving counter. Of course, the table itself wasn’t nice; it was just that Haruhiro’s group could never sit at a spot that made them so conspicuous. Something to do with rank, importance, pecking order…

“Whoa.” Ranta finally noticed Renji’s party too. “Goddamn show off, that Renji.”

Mogzo, looking as if he’d been rebuked instead of Renji, craned his neck to look, too. “Wow.”

Ranta and Mogzo were both justified in their reactions. As if silver hair wasn’t attention-grabbing enough, Renji wore a fur-lined surcoat over his armor. The giant sword leaning against the table was equally impressive, and it made Haruhiro wonder how Renji had managed to acquire it. Had he bought it, he must have paid quite the coin, and if he hadn’t, Haruhiro wondered where in the world he could have found it.

It wasn’t only Renji that was splendidly equipped. Buzz-Cut Ron, sitting next to him, was dressed in magnificent armor, and Glasses-Boy Adachi was in long, black robes that shone with the gleam of a high price tag. Sassa was dressed in a scanty way that reminded Haruhiro of Master Barbara–leading him to guess that she had became a Thief too. Sassa, a beauty from the start, was now seductive to boot.

Sitting at Renji’s feet was Chibi, whose robes marked her as undoubtedly a Priest, but which, unlike what Manato or Mary wore, were made of finer material and finished with embroidery at the edges.

“They’re rookies though…. right?” Ranta looked dumbfounded. “They arrived the same time we did, joined Crimson Moon the same time. Why’s there that big a difference between us and them?”

Apparently, it didn’t matter whether someone was a full Crimson Moon member or a trainee; all those who had only recently been with Crimson Moon were considered “rookies.” But no one who saw Team Renji would have considered

them amateurs, and any who did would be in for a nasty surprise.

It was nigh impossible to catch up to Team Renji, Haruhiro admitted to himself. If anything, the gap between them would only grow wider; Haruhiro's party would remain at rock bottom, the small fry of small fries, while Renji climbed further and further up. Soon, everyone would acknowledge Team Renji as the best, and if they happened to meet Haruhiro's team somewhere in the field, Renji wouldn't even notice they existed. Haruhiro and the others would be forgotten as all the attention fell on Team Renji.

If Manato hadn't died, would things have been different? "We've really become a good team," Manato had said, genuinely meaning it. Manato often came to Sherry's, so he must have known how well Renji's party was doing. Had Manato ever felt held back? Disappointed? Frustrated? Perhaps Manato had thought, 'Renji is advancing higher and higher. And what've I been doing? If only I had better teammates…' Manato was only human, after all, so the thought must have occurred to him, even if only in a far corner of his mind.

Why didn't Renji invite Manato to join him in the beginning? Manato was more than capable of contributing. Had Manato been with Team Renji, they would have been even more formidable. If Manato had been with Team Renji then surely, surely he would still be alive now.

"Hey! Hey!" Ranta was pulling on his arm.

Haruhiro hadn't even realized that his gaze had been on the floor. When he lifted his head up, a silver haired man was glancing down at him. He almost yelped in surprise.

"I hear Manato's bitten the dust." Low and husky, Renji's voice was not something easy to forget.

"Th–" Haruhiro started, but stopped, unsure of what he wanted to say. That? This? There? What? Finally, "What's it to you?"

Expressionless as ever, Renji held out a clenched hand and, unfurling his fingers, dropped something. Haruhiro caught the object without thinking. When he looked, he saw that it was a coin.

Mogzo inhaled so sharply that he nearly fell backwards out of his chair. Ranta's

eyes were so wide they were popping out of their sockets; he looked as if he wanted to say something, but was at a loss for words. Haruhiro's right hand, the hand that the coin now rested on, started to tremble.

Of course, it wasn't fake, so this would be the first time any of them had laid eyes on the real thing.

"A gold?"

"My condolences. Take it," Renji said, dismissively, and then turned on his heels to walk away.

"…D-d-don't mess… don't…" Haruhiro stood up abruptly, and he felt blood rush to his head.

Haruhiro wanted to chase after Renji, to punch him with all his might. But he didn't. There wasn't any way he could. In the end, when he caught up, Haruhiro said, "R-Renji! Wait up! Hold on a sec!"

Renji finally stopped, turning to regard Haruhiro with an expression clearly stating the inconvenience. "What."

"It's… It's…" Haruhiro swallowed. Renji was damn scary. It wasn't normal for a person to be so intimidating. "It's just that… I don't think I can accept this… It just… feels wrong."

"I see." Renji stretched out his hand, palm up.

That was it? Haruhiro would have thought that Renji would have more to say. But he didn't. Maybe it was better that way; Haruhiro breathed a large sigh of relief, so large it felt like a lifetime's worth, and placed the gold coin back in Renji's hand.

It was only later that he regretted it. Just a little. It was a gold he had returned. The equivalent of one hundred silvers.

Renji had left after that, saying nothing more after reclaiming the coin. When Haruhiro returned to the table, Ranta immediately assaulted him.

"HARUHIRO, HOW MUCH OF AN IDIOT ARE YOU?!" Ranta railed at him.

“Why did you give it back? It would’ve been fine to keep it! We could’ve split it evenly between the three of us, thirty-three for you and Mogzo and thirty-four for me! ARE YOU RETARDED?!”

“Why do you get to so casually keep the extra silver?” Haruhiro remarked.

“Because I’m me! What a fucking waste! We could’ve bought our contracts with that and had plenty left over!”

“But that’s…” Mogzo’s eyebrows were knit tightly together, and the corners of his mouth set in a frown. “I don’t think that’s a good thing. If we bought our contracts using Renji’s money, I don’t think it would have made Manato very proud of us.”

“Like you would know!” Ranta spat. “He’s not here anymore! We have to look out for ourselves now! GOD DAMN IT. That was a GOLD. And that Renji just handed it out just like it was nothing. How many of those does he have? I only have three silvers left!”

“What? Only three?” Haruhiro stared hard at Ranta and his messy hair. “No way… Why do you have so little? What have you been using your money on?”

“Shut up! This and that okay? This and that! I can use my money however I want!”

“Then you’ll never save up enough to buy your contract.”

“You don’t have the right to say shit! You ruined my best chance at buying my contract just now!”

“No…” Haruhiro placed both his elbows on the table and planted his face in his palms. “We can’t keep going on like this. It has nothing to do with Manato. It’s our problem. It’s just like you said, Ranta. Manato’s not here anymore.”

Ranta scoffed. “I’ve been thinking that this whole time.”

“Doing nothing but thinking it,” Mogzo said, with unusual force. “You can’t just think it. You need to take action and do something about it.”

“…We’re a mess.” Haruhiro bit his lower lip. “And it’s not just Mary. Yume and

Shihoru have stopped talking to us. It wasn’t like that before.”

Ranta put his cheeks in his hands and looked off to the side. “Try to fix our relationship with them? Ain’t gonna work. It’s way too late now.”

Haruhiro didn’t know whether it would work or not. All he knew was that he had to try.

Chapter 15: Apologies

Haruhiro attempted approaching Yume and Shihoru with casual topics for starters. ‘So, how was your morning? Did you have trouble waking up? Same as always? I see…’

Or, ‘So, what’d you have for dinner last night? Same thing as always? I see…’

Or, ‘So, we met Renji last night. It was ridiculous. Not interested? I see…’

Or, ‘So, what’d you bring for lunch? Bread? I see…’

Or, ‘So, you look tired…’

So…so…so… Haruhiro was starting to sound like he compulsively started his sentences with ‘so’. He wasn’t exactly being ignored, but it depressed him that all the replies he got were the bare minimum. Mary was her loner self–cold, distant, and unapproachable. It made Haruhiro wonder if she found any joy in her life at all. He admitted that he wasn’t exactly enjoying his own life now, but it wasn’t as bleak as Mary seemed to make hers.

They returned from Damroww to Altana’s in the evening and sold their day’s loot. The day’s earnings came to one silver and fifteen capas each which, for a party like theirs, wasn’t bad. But it wasn’t good either.

Haruhiro skipped going to the tavern that night and returned straight to their lodge. After he finished taking a bath, he squatted down to wait in the hallway until Yume came, having emerged from the bathhouse herself.

“Er, Yume?”

Yume stopped, but didn’t turn to look his way. She continued to pat down her hair with a piece of cloth. Yume always wore her hair braided, and now that it was down she looked like a completely different person.

The awkward silence between them stretched a few seconds longer.

“Um, Shihoru’s not with you?” Haruhiro said, finally.

“She’s in the room.”

“I see. Umm…” Haruhiro stood up, rubbed the back of his neck. “Are you mad?”

“No.”

“Really? But… It seems like…”

“Yume said she isn’t mad-yan. Has Haru just assumed that she was?”

“I… might have.”

“Why?”

“Because we invited Mary to join our party without asking you or Shihoru. I figured we couldn’t be left without a Priest, but maybe I decided on her too early. Though I wasn’t the only one who made the decision…”

“If it wasn’t you, then who?”

“…Kikkawa introduced Mary to us, and me, Ranta, and Mogzo made the decision. So I guess it’s the three of us to blame.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Huh?”

“I said that it isn’t-yan.”

“…Yume?”

“You’re an idiot, Haru.” Yume wrung her hair with the cloth. “It’s not the three of you. It’s not like that at all.”

“Yume, wait…” Haruhiro turned to face her, starting to reach out. But he pulled back. “Hold on… what’s wrong?”

“You don’t get it, do you? It’s because you don’t understand anything Yume and Shihoru are like this.”

“But…” Haruhiro dropped his gaze to the floor. “It’s just that…I mean, you and Shihoru never even tried to talk to me. How could I understand?”

“Yume’s not good at expressing how she feels-yan. It’s hard for Yume. Shihoru, not so much.”

“It’s not like I—!” Haruhiro felt his voice rising and consciously pulled himself back. “…It’s not like I’m good at talking either. And at the time… it all came as a shock.”

“If that’s so, then it was the same for everyone-yan.”

“The same… for all of us. I guess that’s true.”

“Then isn’t it everyone?” And Yume started to cry. “It’s not just one person’s fault that things are like this now-yan. It’s not just you, Haru, or Ranta, or Mogzo. It’s Yume’s and Shihoru’s fault too-yan. Is Yume wrong? We’re teammates, right? Counting Manato, the six of us were real friends. Was Yume wrong?”

“…No, you’re weren’t.”

She’s right, Haruhiro thought. *Yume isn’t the one who’s wrong. I am.*

Manato had said once that they had become a good team. He had meant himself, Haruhiro, Ranta, Mozgo, Yume, and Shihoru. The six of them, together, had become a good team. Even though one of the six was now gone, it wasn’t as if Manato had been able to do everything by himself. Even if the rest of them only contributed in small ways, the six of them together could accomplish things that Manato couldn’t do alone.

Manato had surely understood that, and understood it well. That’s why even though Ranta was selfish, Haruhiro was inept, Mogzo was dull-witted, Yume was awkward, and Shihoru was cowardly, Manato had never said a word in criticism.

The five of them were so lacking that nothing would work if even one were missing. Manato completed them, filled in the gap left over when the rest of them fell short. It was the six of them together that made the team.

When bad things happened, it happened to all of them. When good things happened, it happened to all of them. When things got tough, it was tough for everyone. None of them were strong enough to bear it all alone, but they could at least share in it, the hardship and the pain.

Haruhiro hadn't thought to share anything. It was just him, Ranta, and Mogzo, three boys griping to each other over drinks every evening solely for their own sakes. What did Yume and Shihoru think about being left out? Of course they would have thought that they had been unwanted, been made to feel unbearably sad and lonely.

"Yume, I'm sorry—"

And as the words came out of his mouth, Haruhiro finally understood why Manato used his dying breath to apologize to him.

That day, Manato had praised everyone except for Haruhiro. To Haruhiro, he had said nothing, and so Haruhiro had been gloomy and depressed. That had been on Manato's mind the whole time, surely.

"…Manato."

Suddenly, he couldn't see. Were tears something that came this quickly, overflowed this fast? The small semblance of calm he had maintained was swept away in an instant. Haruhiro's knees gave out and he dropped, face in his lap.

Stupid Manato. Why were you apologizing? Why? There was no need to. I didn't want…

It wasn't right. That wasn't the time. Manato must have known that he wasn't going to make it. Surely, more than apologizing to Haruhiro, he had wanted to say other, more important things. He hadn't had to make his last words an apology. But of course Manato would have.

Manato had said to Haruhiro: I don't think I was the type of person that had a lot of friends. But he was completely wrong about that. Completely, utterly wrong.

Why? Why did he die? Why did he have to die?

"Haru…" Yume crouched down and embraced him. She was crying too.

Weeping, she gently stroked his back, his shoulders, his head. Their touching cheeks were both wet with tears and he could hear her raspy breaths near his ear. Haruhiro didn't know how long he stayed like that, crying as he clung to her.

When he finally regained calm, he felt empty, as if he had cried out all the tears he ever would. Yume, too, had stopped crying some time ago, but even so they still held on to each other. It was strange… as if they couldn't find a reason to part. They embraced each other just to embrace each other now.

But it felt good. Her body was soft and warm…

No. No, no, no. He couldn't let his mind wander there. It would get awkward. Maybe even more than awkward. And naturally, Yume wasn't thinking anything like that. Of course Haruhiro wasn't either. They were teammates. Friends. Just friends.

"Haru."

"Y-y-yes?" Hearing her say his name was so unexpected and flustered him so much, he only barely squeaked out his reply. He kicked himself for getting so panicked.

"Yume…" she continued.

"Yes?"

"Yume will try her best," she said, hugging Haruhiro even more tightly.

And though it Haruhiro admitted that it felt good, at the same time he wished she wouldn't do that. Wait. Where was she going to "try her best"?

"Try what?" he asked.

"With Mary. Yume doesn't know if it'll work, but Yume will try her best to get along with Mary-yan."

"Ah, yeah. Right. If you can do that, it'll help with stuff… I think."

"Yume doesn't know if she'll manage to. In fact, Yume's a little worried-yan. Yume thinks Mary might actually hate her."

“Really? I don’t think she hates you, but…”

“Once a while, Yume and Mary will make eye contact, and her eyes are super cold. Her eyes and her expression too-yan.”

“It’s not just you, though. She’s like that to everyone.”

“Really? If that’s so, it’s okay-yan. Yume has a feeling it won’t be easy though.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right.”

“Can Yume really do it? Yume will try her hardest, but Haru, can Yume ask a favor?”

“A favor? From me? Like what?”

“Yume has discovered that that being hugged tight like this is super calming-yan. Hug Yume tighter and tell her she can try her hardest.”

“Is that… really okay?” he asked, uncertain. It would be a hug for encouragement, nothing more. It wasn’t as if he would mean anything else by it; purely an encouragement hug, that’s what it was. It should be fine. “If you say so…”

He drew her in closer, hugging her tight and with all his strength, until a sigh escaped her lips. He wanted to tell her to quit it, since he was hugging her for the sole purpose of encouragement, and yet at the same time, he felt a sort of excitement starting to come over him, threatening to overwhelm him, to make him explode.

Don’t give in! Don’t lose! He thought to himself. What did it mean to lose anyway? What did it mean to win? He had no idea. He just had a feeling that if he lost here, it would be bad. Really bad.

He closed his eyes. “Do the best you can, Yume.”

Yume didn’t say a word, but simply nodded.

Haruhiro opened his eyes and instantly froze. Shihoru was standing at the opposite end of the hall.

“Er…”

“Hm?” Yume looked over that way, too. “Ah…”

“Uhh…. umm… uh…” Shihoru began to fidget with her feet, looking panicked.

But it was the same for Haruhiro and Yume. How long had she been standing there? Why hadn’t either he or Yume noticed her coming?

It really wasn’t what it looked like! But that wouldn’t do any good. No matter what he said now, it was too late. They had been caught in a position that just begged for a misunderstanding. He had to clarify, and clarify right now.

Haruhiro and Yume sprung away from each other.

“It’s not what you–” They both said in perfect unison then looked back at each other at the same time.

“I’m sorry! I–” Shihoru began to back away. “I didn’t know! My sense for this stinks so I didn’t notice! I-I-I’m really sorry!”

“No, that’s what I mean, it’s not what you think!” Haruhiro said.

“Haru’s right! It’s nothing like that-yan! Yume just asked Haru to embrace her tight, that’s all!” Yume added.

“Yume, explaining it like that isn’t helping!”

“Oh? How come?”

“I’m sorry, I’ll leave now!” Shihoru said, running away as fast humanly possible.

Yume groaned and placed her cheek in her hand. “Shihoru and Yume share rooms so Yume will explain everything to her later-yan. It’ll be okay.”

“I’ll… leave it to you,” Haruhiro sighed, rubbing the back of his neck.

He glanced back at Yume for a brief moment and for some reason felt embarrassed. He shouldn’t really hug a girl if he didn’t have any special feelings for said girl, but he had done it anyway. What was he going to do if, because of that, special feelings that weren’t there before started to sprout?

Nah, no way that's going to happen, he assured himself.

Chapter 16: Aiming for the Top

Shihoru suddenly came to apologize as they left the lodge the next day. “I—I’m… I’m sorry! Yume explained everything. Because I thought it was for sure *that* kind of relationship… I’m sorry for jumping to conclusions…”

Although the apology was all well and good to Haruhiro, he kind of wished that she hadn’t made it with Ranta and Mogzo in earshot.

“Relationship?” Ranta’s nostrils flared as he brought his face close to Haruhiro’s. “What kinda relationship is ‘*that*’ kinda relationship’? Relationship between who, hmmm?”

Haruhiro leaned away from him. “None of your business.”

“That ain’t true. Tell me. C’mon! Spit it out!”

“Like Shihoru said, it was just a misunderstanding.”

“I want to know about every single detail and exactly what sort of ‘misunderstanding’ it was.”

Yume cut in. “You see—”

Haruhiro, afraid that she was going to say more than necessary again, hoped beyond hope that his fears would turn out groundless. But it was just as he thought.

“Yesterday,” Yume continued, “Yume asked Haru to hold her tight and Shihoru walked in on us. And—”

Mogzo made some sort of surprised choking noise and his eyes went wide.

“What?! What the hell, Haruhiro!” Ranta’s eyes looked like they were going to pop out of their sockets. “Are you serious?! Are you frickin’ serious?! Since when did you get to second base?!”

“What do you mean by ‘second base’—” said Haruhiro, and stopped himself.

“No wait, forget it. I told you, it’s not like that—”

“How’s it ‘not like that’?! You were gonna do it but panicked and stopped because Shihoru walked in on you! You had to hit the emergency brake!”

“But Haru was crying…” said Yume, starting to explain.

“Yume,” said Haruhiro, “you didn’t have to mention that…”

“Crying?!” Ranta looked back and forth from Haruhiro to Yume several times, and then ran his hands through his already messy hair. “…I get it now. So that’s what it was all about. In other words… You got rejected. Yume rejected you, then she felt sorry for this eeeeediot and tried to make you feel better. I see. It’s all so obvious now.”

“You’re completely, absolutely, thoroughly wrong, but whatever. I don’t feel like explaining it to you anymore.”

“At any rate….” Yume began speaking, completely ignoring Ranta. It was an ability Haruhiro was rather jealous of. “Yume’s decided that she’s going to try to get along with Mary-yan. Shihoru said she’ll try too.”

Shihoru was hugging her staff, her gaze downwards. “…I don’t think it’s going to work, but I’ll do the best I can.”

“Get along? With Mary?” Ranta frowned. “Not gonna happen. That girl doesn’t have any intention of being friends with us.”

Mogzo hung his head. “But—but we can’t keep going the way we are now. We have to at least try convincing her to heal us in fights…”

It was just as Mogzo said. The problem was more than her lack of desire to even try befriending the rest of them. She wouldn’t heal them in battle. More specifically, she would ignore them if the injury was light when they asked her to heal, no matter how much it hurt. Well, not exactly ‘ignore’, and more like ‘outright reject’. She would only heal them if it was an injury that impeded movement or if it was life-threatening.

Her attitude towards teammates who were in hurt and in pain was unacceptable. Manato used to heal them right away, no matter how slight the injury. Even if it

wasn’t a wound that needed attention, him being there for them provided a sense of security in a fight.

With Mary, there was no such peace of mind. What if one of them was badly injured and she suddenly refused to heal them? Everyone was afraid that she would ditch them the moment they needed her the most.

“As a start….” Haruhiro began to speak, looking at each of the others in turn. Each except for Ranta. “We need to build up trust with her. We won’t make any progress without doing that first. Who knows? Mary might have her own way of looking at things. Maybe we’re not getting along with her because we don’t know what she’s thinking.”

Ranta scoffed. “You sure it isn’t purely because she’s a horrible person? It’s gotta be some sort of disorder. Psychological disorder. Chronic Innately Horrible Personality Syndrome. With no known cure.”

“But we have to have a Priest…”

“In that case, Haruhiro, you become a Priest! Then it’s goodbyeeeeeeee forever to Mary! It’s settled, then! BEST IDEA EVER! Damn, I’m good!”

Haruhiro had already considered it, but changing his class was best left as a last resort. Going off to scout alone, always positioning himself at the back of an enemy… being a Thief suited him and he was looking forward to improving his skills as one.

Also, he had realized something when speaking with Yume yesterday.

“Ranta,” said Haruhiro.

“What?”

“Me, you, and Mogzo decided to invite Mary to join the team, right?”

“Yeah, and it was a huge mistake so that’s why I’ve been saying we should kick her out ASAP.”

“But she became one of us, our teammate and companion, when she accepted, right?”

Ranta seemed as if he was going to say something, but then shut his mouth, turning his gaze downwards. He looked almost ashamed.

Haruhiro continued, clasping his right wrist with his left hand. “Mary is who she is. We can’t suddenly discriminate against her for being who she is. If she always feels that it’s us five versus her, she’ll never feel comfortable around us even if she wanted to. It’s not like she’s a magical healing machine.”

“True,” Yume said, putting a finger to her chin and nodding. “Mary’s been treating us coldly, but maybe we’ve been treating her the same-yan.”

Mogzo nodded his head slowly and gave a grunt of agreement.

“May—maybe…” Shihoru said hesitantly as if she didn’t have very much confidence in what she was about to say. “Mary’s actually a good person… on the inside.”

“NO WAY!” Ranta immediately turned his back to them. “No frickin’ way! There’s no way in hell that’s even possible. She’s a stinkin’ hell-spawned harpy to the core. I don’t care what you guys say, I’m not changing my mind! We should just get rid of her and eeeeediot Haruhiro should become a Priest.”

“If I become a Priest,” Haruhiro said, “then I won’t heal you no matter what. You’re a Dread Knight. The dark god Skulheill is the enemy of the god of light Luminous. I’m not nice enough to heal my enemies’ wounds.”

“Disqualified! You’re disqualified from being a Priest! Mogzo! Mogzo’s a… wait, we can’t not have a Warrior so… Yume! You become a Priest!”

“Yume wants a wolf, so she can’t quit being a Hunter,” Yume stated.

“Damn it! Selfish brat! Shihoru! What about you?”

“I… I don’t think I’m suited to be a healer. If anyone gets hurt, I’ll panic and…”

“Useless! All of you are seriously useless! You’re a good-for-nothing bunch, the lot of you! Because of that—” Ranta coughed. “Because of that, it’s…better to have that girl around than not. Just pray that she’s just an ice bitch on the outside… But what if she’s a true ice bitch and suddenly, she falls for me and wants to become my bitch and…”

“Umm… I-I doubt that’s gonna happen…”

“Shut up Mogzo! Mogzo?! I was just told off by Mogzo of all people?! No waaaaaay…”

At any rate, their course of action had been decided. They would treat Mary as one of their own and, hopefully, she would begin to feel like she was part of the team too. Things had to start from somewhere, and everyone agreeing on the first step was indeed a start. Without clearing this first hurdle, there wasn’t any way they could advance.

However, it wouldn’t be an easy path ahead by any means.

Mary was waiting for them at Altana’s northern gate as usual. Haruhiro thought it was best to start off by greeting her properly, so he cheerfully called out, “‘Morning!”

It was just a normal greeting, so why did she have to gaze at him with that terrifyingly cold stare? Was she looking down on him? Trying to ridicule him? It was as if she was saying to him with that gaze, *Burn hot, trash. And go rot, ash.*

Only after she finished piercing him with her freezing, absolute-zero eyes did she finally reply. “Morning,” she said brusquely. “Hurry up and get going. I’ll follow.”

So, that’s the way she’s gonna be, huh, Haruhiro thought.

Even so, Yume and Shihoru attempted to engage Mary in conversation while they went to Damroww’s Old Town. Where in Altana did she live? What did she usually have for breakfast and dinner? How long has she been a member of Crimson Moon? The questions were harmless but Mary refused to give any sort of answer.

They endured terse replies such as “Who knows” or “Whatever I feel like”, but when Mary’s temper flared and she replied with “Why does any of that even matter?” both Yume and Shihoru fell silent.

A formidable foe, she was. Well, not really a foe because she was actually their teammate. But even if a normal conversation with her proved impossible, at the very least Haruhiro wanted to improve their teamwork.

Luck was with them that morning, as they chanced upon a group of three goblins. Haruhiro steeled himself for a hard fight and decided to engage. If they could work together as a team and win a fight, things were bound to change for the better.

“Mogzo, Ranta, you guys take one each. Me and Yume will take the third. Shihoru and Mary, support Mogzo and Ranta from range!” Haruhiro commanded.

Even though he had tried calling Mary to support them so normally, what ended up happening was that she just stood there, staring contemptuously at Shihoru as the Mage hit the goblins with [SHADOW ECHO] and [MAGIC MISSILE]. She pretended not to notice Ranta’s wild shout of pain when his left arm was lightly cut.

When Mogzo lost his nerve after being grazed on the temple, she berated him with, “You’re a Warrior, aren’t you?! Why are you backing off just because of that?!”

“Damn it! Who do you think you are?! You’re just standing there not doing shit!” Ranta kicked his goblin with all the strength he could muster.

It went flying backwards, but Ranta quickly closed the distance and thrust his longsword straight out. “[ANGER THRUST]!”

The goblin made a gargling sound as Ranta’s sword went clear through its throat. It struggled violently for a few moments then stopped moving.

Apparently a Dread Knight’s sword techniques and fighting style were based on avoiding true close quarters fighting. It favored medium-range combat, where the Dread Knight would close in only to attack while staying just outside striking range at all other times. Haruhiro had a feeling that what Ranta just did wasn’t exactly the perfect picture of a Dread Knight, but in the end it worked out okay.

With Ranta’s kill, it meant only two more enemies left.

With a grunt of exertion, Mogzo locked blades with his opponent, then used [SPIRAL SLASH] to make the goblin stagger backwards. Without hesitating he followed up with his bastard sword down onto the goblin, giving a shout. The blow split the goblin’s head open and it crumpled to the ground.

One more to go.

“*Malik em paluk!*” Shihoru chanted, drawing the elemental glyph with her staff.

A beam of light about the width of a fist hit the final goblin square in the head, eliciting a howl. Being hit by [MAGIC MISSLE] was about the same as taking a roundhouse from a fully grown man. The goblin was stunned for only the briefest of moments, but in that slightest of openings, Yume stepped in.

“[SWEEPING SLASH]!”

The goblin yelped and leapt diagonally back to avoid the attack. It now had its back to Haruhiro. *Now!* Haruhiro thought, and his body moved on its own. He inhaled and held his breath as he used [BACKSTAB]. The dagger pierced the goblin at precisely the right point and the blade slid easily through the goblin’s back and exited through its abdomen.

Haruhiro knew for certain that that was the result when the technique was properly executed. The goblin staggered about, as if all its strength had been drained from it. Haruhiro pushed the dagger’s blade deeper up into the goblin, then swiftly pulled it back out. The goblin toppled over and didn’t move again.

“Muwahahahaha!” Ranta stripped a claw from the dead goblin’s corpse, laughing high-pitched all the while. “Teamwork was shit, but because of my awesomeness we won! I’m the best! I guess things wouldn’t be interesting if everyone got along perfectly from the start. My arm hurts! Mary! Heal me now!”

Mary thoroughly ignored him and deliberately started to make her way over to Mogzo instead.

“Sit,” she said.

“Yes ma’am.” Mogzo sat down on the ground obediently, the image of a pet dog.

Mary examined his forehead as well as the back of his skull, then touched the cut on his temple. Mogzo grimaced and Mary replied in voice too low for Haruhiro to catch.

Mary then formed a hexagon with her hand and chanted, “O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous… [CURE].”

“She’s perfectly happy to heal *after* the fight’s over…” Haruhiro muttered to himself as he collected the goblin pouches.

The contents came to two silvers, two shiny stones, and some animal fangs. Depending on the value of the stones, Haruhiro guessed that the total came to around four silvers.

“Hey, lady! Enough with Mogzo, get over here and heal me!” Ranta demanded.

“Your wound’s nothing but a scratch.”

“That’s not true! Look! I’ve been bleeding all over the place! It just… sorta kinda stopped though…”

“How about putting some spit on it then? And don’t call me lady. It really does try my patience.”

Ranta backed off. And he was left unhealed with that. Haruhiro had to admit, Ranta would bawl like a baby at even the slightest of cuts, moan and groan at the lightest of grazes.

To put it mildly, Manato was very sensitive to the well being of everyone on the team and he could never completely feel at ease unless everyone was in perfect condition at all times. Now that Haruhiro thought about it… was it really necessary to use healing magic on every little scratch and cut? It did seem like overdoing it just a bit. Especially where Ranta was concerned, the kid had been spoiled rotten by the coddling.

After they had disposed of the goblins’ corpses, Haruhiro approached Mary.

“Could we be the ones that are going about this wrong?” he asked bluntly. “As a healer, it seems like you’re pretty set on the way you do things. Maybe… Is that the norm for other parties?”

“What?”

Haruhiro winced. That ‘what’ alone was almost enough to make him lose his nerve. He wished she would stop using that.

Somehow, he recovered and continued. “It’s nothing, really, but… isn’t there,

you know, different types of Priests or something like that? It's just that… I really don't know anything about you guys. Call it lack of experience, or something like that."

Mary looked as if she was going to reply, then let out a long sigh as if answering would be too bothersome.

"Why ask me." She crossed her arms over her chest and purposely turned away.

And there it was. The 'why ask me' monster rears its ugly head again. Haruhiro felt himself beginning to grow irritated.

"Can't you just… just tell me? I'm a Thief, so I don't know much about Priests. I'll never know at this rate, and I don't think it's a good idea to not know anything…"

"That's your opinion. My opinion is that it's perfectly fine."

"It's not fine—" Haruhiro cut himself off and took a deep breath, trying to subdue his rising temper. He had almost let it get the better of him.

He needed to stay calm. But what was up with her and that attitude? It pissed him off.

"It's not like it's a personal question or anything," Haruhiro persisted. "But in fights, there's the general flow of battle and everyone's roles to think about. I think it's something we should talk over more as a team…"

"How about saying it straight out if you don't like the way I do my job?" Mary replied. "I'll leave immediately."

"No, that's not it, it's just—"

"Then there's no problem, correct?"

"Uh… No… no problem."

Haruhiro wanted someone to tell him, was there any way to have any sort of discussion with her? There didn't seem like any.

Aftwards, Yume and Shihoru valiantly continued to attempt engaging Mary in conversation, but were bitterly rejected at every go.

By evening, they had killed seven goblins, earning themselves two silvers and five capas each. It wasn't too bad for a group like their own, but compared to how Renji threw around golds like they were pocket change made Haruhiro clench his jaw at how pathetic they were.

Mary left as soon as she had received her share of the cut, so the remaining five of them had dinner and then went to Sherry's Tavern.

"Sure is crowded," Yume said. "Yume doesn't want to drink, so Yume will have juice."

"And kind of noisy too," Shihoru agreed. "I don't want alcohol either…"

This was their first time at Sherry's so both Yume and Shihoru were looking all about, wide-eyed and a little nervous.

"Quit gawking at everything, you two!" Ranta admonished, sounding for all the world like a regular. "There's nothing outta the ordinary! It's just a normal tavern, so seriously, quit it!"

Yume and Shihoru, however, probably didn't hear a word he said. When the serving girl arrived soon after, everyone ordered and paid for their drinks. Haruhiro also passed on alcohol and had a lemonade instead. It tasted great; naturally carbonated water from the Tenryuu Mountains, mixed with lemons and honey.

"So Mary is the source of the problem after all," Haruhiro led off.

"Yeah," Yume nodded. "Yume and Shihoru tried to talk to her all day, and it mattered for nothing."

"Naught," Shihoru corrected immediately. "The saying goes 'it mattered for naught'."

"Oh?" Yume blinked. "Yume thought it was 'not', no a ways about it."

"…It's 'no two ways about it', Yume. And it's n-a-u-g-h-t."

“Huh? Yume’s messed up again?” Yume said. “Yume seems to mess up a lot, yan.”

“There’s nothing for it but THIS,” Ranta said, drawing his hand across his throat, as if beheading. “THIS. Just do THIS and get it over with. If we do THIS to that girl then everything will get better. THIS, I’m tellin’ you guys, THIS.”

Ranta really seemed to like doing that gesture, probably because he thought it was cool or something. If so, then he was even more messed up than Yume.

“Er—” Mogzo cut in, looking towards the entranceway to the tavern.

Speaking of the devil really is a thing, Haruhiro thought. There she was. Mary. She entered and looked in their direction briefly. She pretended not to have noticed them, but Haruhiro would have bet at ninety percent chance that she had. There was an open seat at the end of the bar, and Mary settled in.

“What the hell!” Ranta slammed a fist on the table. “What’s with the attitude! Even if it’s just for right now, we’re still in the same party! It’s normal to at least maybe give a nod in our direction!”

“Yume gets the feeling,” Yume said with a pout, her brows knit tightly, “that what’s normal for normal people isn’t normal for Mary-yan. But even Yume got just an *eensy* bit annoyed just now…”

However, Shihoru tapped on her lips with a finger. “But we didn’t greet her in any way either,” she pointed out. “It’s like the pot calling the kettle black…”

“Hmm….” Haruhiro rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess you’re right. We kinda expected to get ignored, so we didn’t even bother. Yeah, that’s not really good either.”

“Fuck that!” Ranta exclaimed. “Why the hell do we have to treat her nice?”

“You’ll be hated by all girls of all sorts with that attitude,” Yume remarked.

“Shut up! There’s no way flat girls can talk for all girls!”

“Don’t call Yume flat!”

“Flat, flat, flat, flat, flat-flat-flat!”

Yume glared angrily at Ranta.

“Ranta,” heaved Haruhiro, “you’d be considered an all out lowlife no matter who talks for who.”

“As if you have the right to talk high and mighty, Haruhiro!” Ranta shot back. “I don’t care about a girl’s feelings! All I care about are the chest, butt, legs, and arms!”

Shihoru glanced at Ranta as if he was some filthy, despicable creature. “It makes me sick to think that someone like you is human.”

“Y-you didn’t have to go that far!” Apparently even Ranta realized that he was in a bad spot now. “It’s not just the chest, butt, legs and arms—I care about their faces too! It doesn’t matter how good their bodies are if they’ve got animal faces! Wait. Why do I get the feeling you’re even more pissed off? Why?”

“Someone’s talking to her,” Mogzo said, pointing in Mary’s direction.

“Whoa.” Haruhiro blinked several times. “No way.”

Though it wasn’t exactly surprising, it was not something Haruhiro had really expected. Haruhiro knew him, the smiling person talking to Mary. They had met and spoken once. That friendly face. Those white garments, covering him from head to toe; that armor under his tunic, and that sword.

“That’s Shinohara, of Orion,” Haruhiro said.

“Orion?” Ranta craned his neck to get a better view. “Seriously? Orion’s that pretty famous clan right? And Shinohara’s Orion’s leader, I think. Not that I care or anything. Why’s he talking with *her*? Hey, our drinks are here. Hey! Let’s toast, guys. Cheers!”

“C-cheers…” Mogzo was the only one who actually replied out loud.

Haruhiro clanked his wooden cup against Mogzo’s, Yume’s, and Shihoru’s and took a sip of the lemonade. Sweet and tangy, it was delicious.

“Hey, Haru.” Yume tugged on the sleeve of Haruhiro’s shirt. “What’s a ‘clan’?”

Haruhiro began to explain. “A clan’s what they call it when…”

It wasn’t like Haruhiro himself was highly knowledgeable on the subject, but from what he understood, clans were groups formed in pursuit of some ideal or goal. Parties usually consisted of five or six people, always including a Priest, whose light magic-based protection was indispensible. However, there were cases when only six people weren’t enough to deal with large groups or unusually strong enemies. There were also places where it was too dangerous for one lone party to enter. It was in these cases when several parties joined up and formed a clan.

“…There’s several well known clans,” Haruhiro continued. “The ‘Dark Berserkers’, ‘Iron Knuckles’, the all-girls clan ‘Wild Angels’. Oh, Orion is pretty famous too.”

“Look,” Ranta said, pointing to Shinohara. “His cloak’s got seven stars in an ‘X’ shape design on it right? That’s Orion’s clan emblem. There’s a few others in the room with wearing the same emblem too.”

Ranta was right. There were several others scattered about the tavern with the similarly decorated cloaks. Shinohara did say once that he and many other Crimson Moon members frequented Sherry’s. Haruhiro supposed that he should greet Shinohara at some point or another, but… he didn’t think now was the time. He was reluctant to interrupt Shinohara while he was talking to Mary.

What sort of relationship did Shinohara have with Mary anyhow? From what Haruhiro could tell, Shinohara was doing most of the talking while Mary just gave obligatory replies at the appropriate times. However, it didn’t look like she was particularly annoyed by Shinohara; if anything, she seemed apologetic. Shinohara finally withdrew, and after continuing to watch him for a bit, Mary returned to her drink.

Ranta snickered softly. “Those two are doing it. The THINGY.”

“It didn’t seem like that to me,” Haruhiro replied.

“Haaaaaaruhiroooo… You’ve seriously gotta be blinder than a bat. ROMANCE was in the air! They’re doing the THINGY. One hundred percent, the THINGY.”

“I’m going to go say hi to Shinohara.”

“Hey! Don’t just ignore me! You’re making me sad here!”

Feel free, Haruhiro thought, and just as he rose from his seat, a hushed clamor of voices began to rise from the other patrons. The reason for it soon became clear.

“Hey, that’s Souma…” someone said.

“Isn’t that Souma?” said another.

And yet another, “It’s Souma!”

“Souma!”

“Souma…!”

Souma. It was the one name being spoken by all the other Crimson Moon members in the tavern. Who was he? No doubt it was a male name, but…

A party of six, consisting of both men and women, entered. Souma must have been the name of the group’s leader. He looked young and…different. Way different. Most apparent was his armor. His entire body was covered in black armor, which fitted him so perfectly, no odd angles or juts could be seen. The material looked incredibly light as well.

It was probably some sort of scale armor, forged by overlapping countless small metal plates. Here and there, orange light seemed to leak from within, rippling and simmering as if drawing breath. His lower body was covered in an unusually long tasset, probably part of the same set of armor that covered his upper body. It was asymmetrical on either side but looked incredibly awesome nonetheless.

The large blade he carried strapped across his back was curved like a katana, the workmanship beautiful and sinister at the same time. It was a sword that would capture the imagination of even the unlikeliest of warriors. The blade at the man’s waist was similar to one on his back, only shorter, and it was of equally splendid craftsmanship. Honestly, Haruhiro would have taken that over the larger one.

The facial features of this man who owned such unique equipment was hardly

ordinary, either. He couldn’t be called handsome in a manly way, or gorgeous in a feminine, but it was clean-shaven and elegant. His almond shaped eyes were deeply serene yet menacing at the same time; they were filled with infinite calm and deepest sorrow. It would be impossible to be scrutinized by those eyes and not be unnerved.

Clearly the men and women who followed him were not your average Crimson Moon members either. The large, dark skinned man with upturned eyes and dazzling green armor was taller than Mogzo. He seemed to be quite a solid build; however, a small head made him appear more lanky than muscular.

Behind the dark skinned man was the exact opposite. A tiny man with a childish face–except that his eyes were anything but innocent. One look from those eyes was surely a curse upon your head. The man next to him had arms that were so long, Haruhiro wondered if he were human at all. That man’s face was hidden behind an eerie looking mask, so it was hard to tell, but Haruhiro had a feeling he was a creature of a different sort. Armor that could have been anything, leather or even metal, covered him from head to toe, and hanging off his back was a giant saw-toothed blade that was probably was just as deadly as it looked.

The two women behind him, though… One look at them and Haruhiro’s heart began to melt. He felt as if he could rest his eyes upon them forever. Souma’s party was composed of four men and two women, and the two women were both gorgeous. One was slightly older and stylishly outfitted, with toned skin. She wore something akin to a dress but her legs and chest were boldly exposed. She also sported an assortment of necklaces, rings, and bracelets, and she was armed with an expensive looking staff and a short sword. But despite all the accessories, she didn’t come across as showy in the least—probably because her beauty was on par with that of the jewelry.

The other woman reminded Haruhiro a bit of Mary. It wasn’t that their faces looked similar or anything; it was her otherworldly beauty that made him wonder if she was even human. She looked younger than him yet older at the same time. He couldn’t tell whether she should be called a beautiful woman or a beautiful girl.

She wore an elaborately engraved breastplate, but was otherwise lightly armored. A sword hung off her belt which… made her a Warrior? Female Warriors were rare indeed. That aside, her lovely silver hair was wholly different

from Renji's. It was as if every delicate strand was made of melted silver, and with eyes of sapphire set within. And if there were such thing as skin white as snow, Haruhiro would call hers as fair. Of course, she wasn't made of snow; her skin was faintly tinged pink. Mary's cold ice wasn't nearly as bright as she was.

But she wasn't human. Her ears. They were pointed.

"Isn't she an elf?" Ranta whispered.

"Elf…" Haruhiro echoed unthinkingly, so awestruck that he forgot to blink as he stared.

Elf. What was that? He had no idea what an elf was, but at the same time knew exactly what it was. Elf. That's right. That woman was probably an elf.

"Hey hey hey!"

Someone's voice came. That voice. That overly hyper, overly happy voice couldn't have belonged to anyone but Kikkawa.

"If it isn't Harucchi, Rantan, Mogcchi, Yumeppi, and Shihon!" he cried. "How're you guys?! I'm GREAT, thanks! Hey, hey! Did you guys notice? Isn't Souma AWESOME?! Never thought I'd see him in the flesh! I'm so lucky! EVERYONE'S SOOOOO LUCKY!!!"

Kikkawa was more hyper-excited today than last time. Perhaps it was because of Souma.

"Kikkawa… who is he?" Haruhiro asked.

"Whaaaaaaat?!" said Kikkawa, disbelieving. "Harucchi, you've never heard of Souma?! No waaaaaaaay! You've gotta be kidding, right? There's no way! Souma's—you know! Souma's Crimson Moon's best warrior! The warrior of warriors!"

Kikkawa barreled on without slowing. "Well, there's some dispute about his actual fighting ability, but no one doubts that he's the best. This is my first time seeing him for real too, but he's something else, isn't he? Way different! Way cooler! If I were a girl, I'd want him!

“SOUMA, I LOVE YOU!!!” he illustrated, and grinned. “Just kidding. I can’t say I’d go that far but isn’t he awesome? He’s highly respected by everyone. I hope I can become someone like that someday…”

“Hell yeah!” Ranta agreed, his eyes literal stars. “God damn it! How did he get his hands on that sorta armor? I want armor like that!”

“…I–I’d like…” Mogzo’s eyes dropped to the floor. “…I’d like a helm. And if possible, plate armor. If I had those I could be a little more…”

Shihoru bit her lower lip as a thought came to her. “I want to learn more spells. I want to help everyone more in fights, with my magic. All I can do now is…”

“Yume… Yume wants armor too,” Yume said. “Yume’s no good with a bow, so she’s fighting in the front all the time. Yume thinks having armor would help…”

“I want…” Haruhiro paused, his eyes still glued on Souma and company. What did he want for himself?

To be honest, unlike Kikkawa and Ranta, Haruhiro had no desire to become like Souma. In fact, he didn’t even believe they could fill the gap between themselves and Renji’s team. To become as well respected and liked as Souma was nothing but a pipe dream. They had no hope of reaching Souma’s level, so why even try? They would only look like idiots for the attempt.

So was staying rock-bottom fine then? a small voice inside him asked. No, not that, either. Haruhiro wanted to keep advancing. Even if they couldn’t climb the ladder skipping rungs like Renji, he wanted to keep moving up, if only one rung at a time. Even if it was only one step at a time, there shouldn’t be any reason why they couldn’t advance higher.

Manato definitely would have thought the same. He wanted to move forward at their own pace, hopefully higher today than yesterday, higher tomorrow than today. But it was useless just to want; they needed to take action to make it happen.

What should I do? Save up more money and use it to learn more skills? Buy better equipment? Money was important, sure, but it wasn’t everything.

Manato had asked him to take care of the others. Did he mean Haruhiro should

do the same thing Manato had done? In other words, become the leader? Was he capable of leading? It was true that someone had to fill the position. But did it have to be him? He didn't want that. He didn't want to take on the burden of the spotlight, the responsibility of leadership. It was too much work.

What about Manato? Did he take up the role of leader because he wanted to? Because he liked leading? Did he fill the role gladly—or did he do it reluctantly? Maybe he hated it, and he really wanted to hurl the responsibility out of the window, but he grit his teeth and endured having to drag everyone else along behind him? Haruhiro didn't think that was the case, but he couldn't say for sure.

"…No! But but but!" At some point, Kikkawa had sidled up shoulder to shoulder with Ranta, and they were both snickering about something. Haruhiro never thought he would see the day Ranta found someone he could get along with. "I never thought I'd meet Souma! I heard his main operating area is where it was formerly Ishmael so he doesn't come to Altana much. I'm SO LUCKY it's scary! Well, not really scary but…"

"Kikkawa! Let's go make friends with Souma! If it's me and you WE CAN DO IT!" Ranta proclaimed.

"Friends? LET'S DO IT! Rantan! Let's go!!!"

Kikkawa and Ranta both got up from their seats simultaneously. It seemed like they were serious about approaching and introducing themselves to Souma. Haruhiro half rose out of his own seat and looked around the tavern. Souma's group was sitting around a table near the counter, and already a horde of people swarmed around them, more joining by the second.

Mary remained where she was, drinking from her own tankard. Shinohara was nowhere to be seen. Where did he go? Haruhiro sat back down and took a sip of lemonade. When he looked up again, it was straight into Yume's eyes. She tilted her head to one side, silently asking Haruhiro what he was going to do.

Haruhiro shook his head, indicating to her just as wordlessly that he wasn't planning to do anything, and brought his cup to his lips for another drink. But doing nothing probably wasn't wise.

A leader, huh? Did Haruhiro have it in him to become one?

Chapter 17: To Hold Dear

It didn’t matter whether or not Haruhiro could lead or not. As long as he was alive, time wouldn’t stop for him. He went to bed, morning came like it always did, and then it was off to Damroww again.

They caught two goblin unawares and, with a surprise attack, immediately wounded one. Ranta and Yume faced off with the injured goblin while Mogzo and Haruhiro took on the one remaining. The unwounded goblin was equipped with a dented helm, a crude chainmail shirt, and a worn-down sword. Still, it made for a tough opponent, though in terms of pure power Mogzo and his size clearly had the advantage.

Mogzo could have thrown himself at the goblin. He could have won, using brute force alone, but he didn’t. He was hesitating. But why? Was Mogzo a coward? Of course it wasn’t necessary to fight like Ranta, recklessly bum rushing enemies, but why was Mogzo so cautious all the time?

Haruhiro watched as Mogzo and the goblin faced off. It was rare for goblins to have helms, but this one was wearing one. It was then that Haruhiro realized: if protected by a helm, a slight blow to the head wouldn’t be life threatening. Without one, even a graze from a blade might be a serious wound, and anyone would think twice about fighting aggressively.

Mogzo had said last night that he wanted a helm and plate armor. He never mentioned anything like a new sword with a sharper edge—what he wanted most was protective gear. Haruhiro guessed that if he had full body armor, he could fight more assertively and with less hesitation.

As for Haruhiro, he always positioned himself behind the enemy, so that was all that he thought about. He wore no armor, so being attacked was frightening. One stroke of a blade could end it all for him, so he always did everything he could to avoid fighting head-on.

But Mogzo couldn’t avoid it. It was his job to take on enemies directly, and if he tried to fight like Haruhiro by always putting himself behind the enemy, things would fall apart for the team pretty quickly.

Haruhiro had never realized this because all he thought about was his own position and role in fights. He had never considered anyone else's roles. The act of thinking about the roles of everyone else on the team never even occurred to him.

"Mogzo!" Haruhiro called as he slashed at the goblin with his dagger.

When the goblin turned towards him, Haruhiro backed away as he always did. The goblin hesitated between its two targets for a fraction of a second, then turned to face Mogzo once more. But Mogzo was already moving, thrusting his bastard sword at the goblin with a shout. The sword impaled the goblin deep in the gut.

Living beings, however, do not die so easily. The goblin made a high-pitched shriek and tried to bring its sword back around to bear on Mogzo. Haruhiro didn't intend to let that happen. Positioned directly behind it, he closed the distance and aimed for the goblin's sword hand; [HIT].

It wasn't enough to cut off the goblin's wrist, but the dagger bit deep to the bone. The goblin dropped its sword. Mogzo gave his bastard sword a twist and the goblin let out a horrible scream, flailing its arms at Mogzo. Haruhiro grabbed the goblin's helm, pulled it backwards with all his strength as if to pry it off, and then rammed his dagger into its exposed throat.

Even after that, it still took a good while before the goblin stopped struggling. Manato had said once that their opponents wanted to live just as much as they did. But fights were to the death, so opponents fought just so. There was nothing more somber and it was neither simple nor easy. Haruhiro and the others killed to take their opponent's valuables, and they did that in order to pay for food; they did it for their own survival.

Yume and Ranta battled the remaining goblin with Shihoru's support. After Shihoru weakened it with a spell, Ranta delivered the killing blow.

As Haruhiro collected the goblin pouches after the fight was over, Mary placed the fingers of her right hand against her forehead so that her middle finger was right between her eyebrows. It was a quick motion, so fast that Haruhiro almost didn't catch it.

It was the same hexagon symbol gesture that Manato made after killing their

opponents, but Haruhiro didn't expect to see it from Mary. She didn't seem like a person who would do any sort of ritual for the sake of a dead enemy, but then, Haruhiro realized, he didn't really know. He didn't know anything about Priests. He hadn't even thought to get to know anything about them.

During their lunch break, Haruhiro tried approaching Mogzo.

"I'll help pay for it, so let's get you a helm," Haruhiro said. "Even if it's a cheap one. Plate armor too; let's try to find you a used set that fits. If we can't find one your size, let's find out how much it costs to get it adjusted."

"…But that's… But… It's not like you've got money to spare… I'd be a horrible person," Mogzo said, uneasily.

"Don't worry about it. As long as I have this, I'm fine for the time being," Haruhiro insisted, indicating his dagger. "But if you don't have the proper gear it affects the entire team, so it's for my sake too. Metal armor's super expensive, so unless we're making tons of money, paying for all of it by yourself isn't really feasible."

"Now that Haru mentions it, Yume agrees," said Yume, and smiled slightly. "Yume will also help pay for it when Mogzo buys his armor. Let's all go shopping for an adorable helmet!"

Shihoru timidly raised her hand. "Me too. I don't have that much to spare, but I'll help too."

"I'm gonna say it here and now, I ain't shelling out a single capa!" Ranta declared.

"Fine. No one expected you to contribute anyway," Haruhiro said, briefly shooting a glance in Mary's direction.

She was gazing at something in the distance, as if the conversation had nothing to do with her. For some reason though, Haruhiro got the feeling that she seemed to be a little lonely too. Maybe it was just his imagination.

Next time he had a chance during a fight, he decided he would observe Mary. Everyone's general impression was that all she did was stay back and lean on her staff. She didn't properly do her job and heal them, and had no intention of ever

properly doing it. That's what everyone believed, but was that really true?

After lunch, the first goblins they ran into were a group of three, and Haruhiro didn't get a chance to worry about Mary all through the fight. After that, they didn't run into any lone goblins, let alone two.

But just as they were about to leave Damroww's Old Town, they unexpectedly collided with a pair.

Caught by surprise, the fight immediately turned chaotic; Shihoru and Mary didn't have a chance to move to protected positions at the rear, and one goblin went straight for Mary.

"Useless girl!" Ranta yelled at Mary, as he full-body tackled the goblin that attacked her. "Quit spacing out!"

"Are you talking to me?" Mary retorted.

As the remaining goblin leapt at Shihoru, Mary swiftly spun her staff and struck it with a massive amount of force. It was the Priest's self-defense skill, [SMASH]. Haruhiro knew it when he saw it; Manato had learned the same one. Mary had been paying attention after all.

There were only two goblins, so the fight went well from then on. As Haruhiro attempted to get himself behind his target goblin, he occasionally stole glances at Mary. *We were wrong*, he realized. That staff wasn't just for decoration, after all; she had learned the [SMASH] skill so she could use the weapon. And she might not have wanted to fight at the front, but when it came down to it, she protected Shihoru.

On top of that, her eyes never left Mogzo until the goblin he fought was dead. When Mogzo took a head-butt from the goblin to the chin, in that moment, Mary's expression turned grave as she watched. Shortly afterwards, she shook her head ever so slightly. She had determined the injury light enough not to warrant healing immediately.

Mary just "stood around doing nothing"? She had "no intention of doing her job"? No, they were wrong about that. From the back lines, Mary carefully observed the fight, and every time one of her teammates took a hit, she made a judgment call to heal or not. And she could fight with that staff when needed.

When the fight was over, Shihoru went up to Mary and said, “Thank you. For earlier.”

Mary turned away. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Did she really have to reply like that? Haruhiro thought. If she just responded with a smile and the normal ‘You’re welcome’, Haruhiro had a feeling that Mary would be well-liked, by girls and guys alike. It wasn’t like it was that hard or anything. And it would ease things up for Mary too. Why did she go to such lengths to antagonize people?

After they returned to Altana and sold their day’s loot, Mary wordlessly began to take her leave. Haruhiro stopped her.

“Mary, hold on a second.”

Mary, running a hand through her hair, turned around, clearly annoyed. “What business do you have with me now?”

The formality. That was why, every single time, it terrified Haruhiro to talk to her. Sometimes, for lack of a better reason, Haruhiro thought Mary had to like being hated. But she was their companion, wasn’t she? Wasn’t it better to be liked? If it were something he had the guts to point out to her, he would have.

But there was no way he could say something like that. Not at the moment—not so soon after she joined their party. Considering that it was Mary, she would just leave. She would say, ‘Enough’s enough. Goodbye,’ and leave.

“It’s not really business,” Haruhiro said, “but do you want to eat dinner with us? Then go to Sherry’s afterwards?”

“I respectfully decline.”

“Why so formal?”

Mary’s gaze dropped to the ground and her eyebrows narrowed a tiny bit. She seemed angry, but Haruhiro sensed a little embarrassment as well.

“No reason in particular,” she replied.

“Ah, I see. Sorry, weird question.”

“It’s fine.” Mary’s scowl faded, but she didn’t look up. She shook her head and began to say, “I will…”

Haruhiro guessed that she meant to say “I will see you tomorrow”. He never possibly expected to hear that from Mary, who usually left them without a word at the end of the day. In the end, though, she never finished her sentence.

Leaving it at “I will”, she turned her back to him and walked away briskly. There was something off with her stride; it was almost as if she were leaving in a panic.

Ranta scoffed. “Horrible girl. Seriously.”

“Really?” Mogzo stroked a stubbly chin. His facial hair was quite dark. “I get the feeling that there was something different about her today.”

Yume nodded vigorously in agreement. “Mary was different today. Yume got the feeling that she was an *eensy* bit adorable.”

Ranta glanced sidelong at her. “Quit using adorable for anything and everything. Your definition of adorable is so broad, I have no idea what you’re trying to say.”

“It’s okay if Ranta doesn’t get it-yan. Yume doesn’t particularly care if Ranta understands anyway.”

“How’s that an adorable thing to say?!”

As they pacified Yume and Ranta, they searched the marketplace for Mogzo’s helm. They found a variety of used metal ones on display in an armor shop and bought an inexpensive “barbute”-type. Barbute helms were cheap because they were forged from a single sheet of metal, making the crafting process relatively simple.

.

They were shaped sort of like the big toe on a person’s foot, with a “T” shaped opening for the eyes, nose, and mouth. Upon first glance, it looked like it would slide off pretty easily, but an inspection of the leather-padded inside told them otherwise.

The helm fit Mogzo's big head perfectly, but it was scratched and dented so Ranta haggled tenaciously until he brought it from forty-two silvers down to eighteen. Haruhiro paid four silvers, Yume and Shihoru three each, and Mogzo the remaining eight.

As they ate dinner at a food stall, Ranta puffed out his chest and pointed out, "It's like I pretty much paid twenty-four silvers, so you guys should be thanking me!"

Yume and Shihoru both narrowed their eyes at him and Haruhiro was slightly taken aback by the brag, but had to admit that it might be true. If Ranta hadn't been such a shameless barterer, they might not have been able to bring the price so far down. Twenty-four silvers was an exaggeration, but thanks to Ranta, they probably saved about ten silvers more than what one would expect.

"Thank you, Ranta," Haruhiro said with an deliberately serious expression.

Ranta's eyes went wide with surprise and he looked away towards the ground. "…A—As long as you guys know it. My amazing abilities of… of… Price bartering? Price evaluation? Whatever. You guys constantly underestimate my abilities, so be more respectful next time, okay? Seriously. I'm asking a favor here. Not that I really expect anything…"

They had planned to search the shops for plate armor after dinner, but it was late by the time they finished eating so they went straight to Sherry's. Mary was nowhere to be seen, and Haruhiro wondered if she purposely avoided coming tonight because he had invited her earlier.

"Seriously, that girl is anything but adorable. Same goes for Yume," Ranta said. It seemed that he was bitter about Mary not thanking him after he saved her in the last fight. "She doesn't say hi, she doesn't say thank you, she doesn't say sorry. It's over for her. All she has is good looks and nothing but good looks. She's top-class hot. Not as hot as that elf in Souma's party though…"

"B—but…" Mogzo hadn't taken off his new helm yet. It seemed that he was really into it. It must be hard to drink with it on, though. "Last time she healed me, she said sorry to me. Mary."

"Quit lying, Mogzo," Ranta replied. "She ain't that kind of person."

“I’m not lying. When I got wounded on the head that time, she touched the cut and said she was sorry if she was hurting me.”

“That’s right, she did…” Haruhiro remembered now. He was out of earshot, but Mary definitely said something to Mogzo. “So that time, that’s what she was saying. She was apologizing…”

“She protected me during that last fight,” Shihoru nodded. “She’s not friendly, but I don’t think she’s cold-hearted, or a bad person.”

“Mary’s super adorable!” Yume declared.

“I made it a point to watch Mary today and—” Haruhiro explained everything he noticed from that last fight to the others.

In her own way, it seemed that Mary did her job thoroughly and completely. It was just that she never told anyone what she was thinking, and that she spoke so curtly. She had an attitude problem, and that was what invited misunderstanding.

“I think that if we made an effort to understand why she does things the way she does,” Haruhiro continued, “we could definitely work with her. But the question is, is it enough to stop there?”

“What’s so bad about it?” Ranta scoffed, and took a big swig of beer. “As long as that bitch does her job, then what’s the problem? And I’m not convinced that she’s even properly doing her job in the first place!”

“But you thinking that is the bigger problem,” Haruhiro replied.

“How does what I think matter to you? You guys just ignore my opinions anyway.”

“Quit whining.”

“I ain’t whining, just telling it like it is. That bitch is an outsider, but I’m no different.”

Did Ranta really feel that way? Haruhiro had never noticed. It wasn’t just Mary; Haruhiro never properly made an effort to understand Ranta either. Thinking about it now, Ranta was like a little kid. He wasn’t okay with callous treatment;

but in that case he should be more careful about what he said to others. Whatever treatment he got, he brought it upon himself.

However, telling him to fix that was like telling him to fix his personality, which was easy to say but wasn't nearly as easily done. It wasn't like Ranta had no redeeming qualities with the way he was. He had his good points too.

"I'm sorry, Ranta," Haruhiro apologized. "It's my bad. I'll be more careful from now on."

"T-That's right! Y-You'd better be, idiot!"

"You didn't have to go that far."

"There's nothing wrong with calling an idiot an idiot, eeeeediot!"

"Ranta…" Haruhiro rubbed the back of his neck.

He didn't even feel like getting angry anymore. Ranta was a little kid. A bratty little kid, through and through. Rather than respond properly, better just to say whatever and leave it there. And Haruhiro recalled Manato doing exactly that.

Haruhiro sighed and taking a look around the tavern, noticing someone wearing a surcoat with Orion's symbol. It was Shinohara. He was heading up the stairs to the second floor.

"Er, I'm gonna go say hi to Shinohara."

"Whaaaaat?!" Ranta protested. "You're planning to join Orion all by yourself, aren't you?! I won't let you! I'm going too!"

"I don't plan on any such thing. But I guess if you want to come along…"

"Me too, then," Mogzo said.

"And Yume's going too!" Yume declared.

"Umm… then, me three," Shihoru said. "Being left here all alone is…"

A small part of Haruhiro wondered if it was really okay for everyone to come, but the five of them filed up the stairs to the second floor nonetheless. Shinohara

noticed him coming before Haruhiro had a chance to say anything, and stood up from his seat.

“Well, it’s been a while, Haruhiro. Are those your teammates?”

Wow. They had only met once but Shinohara remembered him. Haruhiro was impressed. He also noticed that around them stood only Orion clan members. There must have been twenty, no, more than thirty present. There were more males, but around a third were female. Everyone wore white Orion cloaks.

“G-good evening,” Haruhiro stuttered. “Umm…”

“Come, come, over here,” Shinohara invited. “Hayashi, could you grab some chairs for them?”

“Sure thing.” The one called Hayashi was a short-haired, narrow-slit eyed man and he brought a few chairs over from where he was sitting. “Here you go.”

Shinohara sat back down and invited Haruhiro and the others to take a seat as well. Haruhiro noticed the other Orion clan members were incredibly well-mannered. Rather than stare at the newcomers, the other Orion members quietly chattered and laughed amongst themselves, and even though Haurhiro and the others didn’t order anything, drinks were set down before them.

Mogzo, Yume, Shihoru, and even Ranta. Each was as silent as a mouse; everyone was awed by Orion.

“So, how are things going for you, Haruhiro?” Shinohara asked. “I see you haven’t bought your Crimson Moon contracts yet, but have you at least gotten used to life here?”

“Yeah, but how did you know I haven’t bought my contract yet?”

“Everyone’s interested in how rookies are doing. You’re working in Damroww’s Old Town area, right? It seems that behind your back, there are some who mock your party as ‘The Goblin Slayers’.”

“Ah. Well, we really don’t go after anything but goblins…”

Shinohara was silent for a few moments then straightened in his seat. “I’m sorry

about your friend.”

“…Thanks.” Haruhiro’s gaze dropped to the table and clasped his hands tightly together.

So Shinohara even knew about that. But maybe it wasn’t all that uncommon for word to spread quickly. In the beginning, Altana seemed to be a sprawling behemoth of a city, but in reality, it was a town with everything crammed into a very limited amount of available space. The small world of Crimson Moon was just a mere chip.

It seemed to Haruhiro one should assume that, as long as information wasn’t deliberately being hidden, it would spread in an instant.

Haruhiro continued, “…I don’t know what else to say, except that I’m sorry too. He was a good person.”

“I may sound ostentatious,” Shinohara said, “but I know how it feels to lose friends. I’ve lost companions before too.”

“Is…that so? I don’t know what to—”

“Never forget that feeling.” Shinohara spoke in a quiet tone, but in his eyes were a deep, deep sadness as he looked from Haruhiro to each of the others. “Although you move on bearing the pain, carve it well into your hearts and hold dear the companions who are with you now. Hold dear the time you spend with them, because once it goes, you will never be able to get it back. There will always be regrets, but try your hardest not to be left with any..”

Haruhiro and the other’s hands automatically went to their chests as they listened to Shinohara’s words. *Hold dear the companions who are with you now…* If only they had treated Manato more dearly, if only they had appreciated him more while he was still alive. If only they tried to understand him… but they couldn’t do any of those things now.

But because of that, they had to hold dear the time they had with each other now, in order not to be left with any regrets.

Haruhiro didn’t know when he was going to die. It was the same with Mogzo, Ranta, Yume, and Shihoru. And Mary as well. If someone else were to die,

Haruhiro didn’t want to regret not having said this, done that, not anymore. He didn’t want to any of the others to have any regrets, either.

“Shinohara, can I ask you something?” Haruhiro said.

“Sure, if it’s something I can help with.”

“It’s about Mary. I saw you talking with her yesterday and I’m sure you already know that she’s in our party now.”

“Yes. What about her?”

“Can you please tell me what you know about her? I might be asking the wrong person, but even if tried to ask Mary herself, I doubt she’d talk to me.”

Shinohara tapped his finger on the table. “I believe… that’s something Hayashi would be more suited to answering. They were in the same party once.”

“…Really?” Haruhiro shifted his gaze to the table next to him, where Hayashi was taking a drink from his tankard.

Their eyes met. Hayashi held Haruhiro’s gaze and nodded.

Chapter 18: Her Reasons

"…Mary and I were friends in the same party when we were still Crimson Moon trainees. Me and Michiki were Warriors, Mutsumi was a Mage, Ogg was a Thief, and Mary our Priest. Things went relatively well for us at the start.

Like you guys, we started by hunting goblins in Damroww's Old Town area. We saved up our money, and after ten days, bought our Crimson Moon contracts. We then upgraded our equipment, learned new skills, and started going after kobolds in the Siren Mines around five miles north of Altana. Even then, we had an easy time of it, never really having any trouble in fights. Back then, I never realized how unusual that was.

Without a doubt, Mary was the one who brought stability to our fights. In one regard, she's still the same: a real beauty, but she never let it get to her head. And back then she was always smiling, cheerful. She laughed all the time. With her around, there was no time for the rest of us ever to be in bad moods.

She didn't just memorize light magic spells. She learned self-defense skills, too, to fight shoulder-to-shoulder with me and Michiki. And of course she never neglected her duties as the party's healer; she would treat us immediately, even if it was nothing but a scratch. Fighting with me and Michiki at the front, healing us when we got hurt, backing up Mutsumi and Ogg when they looked like they were in trouble…it was like she was three people in one.

Our party was only five people, but it really felt more like seven. Fights were easy. Way too easy.

We didn't really get much attention though. A lot of people arrived at the same time we did, and some other parties excelled way past us. But the more we fought, the more confident we got.

At that time, we didn't know about fear. We had never encountered anything that'd give us even a semblance of fear, so I guess that was to be expected. I know now though. But Mary…surely, it was different for her, back then. She must have been afraid for us every time we were wounded, and that would be why she healed us right away.

Maybe she was afraid of the one little tear that could unravel the entire tapestry, and so she prevented it any way she could. I think she knew it all along. She knew that in reality, we were winning our fights by only paper-thin margins. It was the rest of us that didn't realize it. We had become arrogant. Overconfident.

Other parties were also operating in the Siren Mines, and we didn't want them to outstrip us. So, confident that we were better than them, deeper we went. Deeper, deeper into the mines. There, in the fifth stratum, is where it happened—and it's something I'll never forget.

You may already know, but kobolds are hairy humanoids, but with dog-looking heads. They're usually a little shorter than the average person, but in the lower depths of the Siren Mines, kobolds larger than 5'6" are very common, and they're incredibly strong. Although they're not as smart as humans in general, their society is highly hierarchical and they have the technology to work metal. They're advancing in magic, as well.

Kobolds specialize in moving as many-person units, and at least a portion of their society consists of audacious fighters, afraid of nothing. We had gotten used to mowing down those kinds of kobolds on our way down to the fifth stratum and honestly, we believed that we were stronger, superior to them. But it wasn't like we were careless. As long as we didn't let ourselves get caught off guard, then certainly, we were way more capable than any usual kobold.

He's called Deathpatch for his black and white patches of hair and for how he's killed numerous Crimson Moon warriors. We heard that he and a few of his underlings are always prowling the mines, and if we were to encounter them, we should run without hesitation. He's been spotted as far up as the mine entrance, so there was need for caution even in the upper strata.

We knew of Deathpatch, but until then, we never saw so much as a sliver of his shadow, no silhouettes of his form. We didn't really see any need to be careful.

When we saw Deathpatch's humongous figure coming at us, we weren't so impudent to think that we could engage him and win. But we were on the fifth stratum. The exit was levels and levels far above us, and there was no way we could easily escape. We thought we didn't have a choice but to fight.

We decided on a battle plan where Michiki and I took turns keeping Deathpatch occupied while Mary, Ogg, and Mutsumi took care of his underlings. At first it

went smoothly. Deathpatch was as strong and tough as the rumors said, but between me and Michiki, we were able to take him on. Mary and the others steadily whittled away at the others. And whenever one of us got hurt, Mary would heal us right away.

Then came the time that all the underlings were dead. We thought we could do it. We could defeat Deathpatch. He was sporting a number of wounds and we were completely fine. To be more precise, we had been wounded, but we were healed to perfect shape.

It was our immaturity and foolishness that led us to misjudge the situation. If we had taken the opportunity to run away at that moment, left Deathpatch behind without a second glance, we might have been able to conceal ourselves and get away.

But we didn't. We pressed the attack on Deathpatch, reddening his black and white hair with blood. However, no matter how much me, Michiki, and Ogg cut into him, no matter how many times Mary bludgeoned him, no matter how much magic Mutsumi threw at him, he wouldn't go down. His movements became sluggish, sure, but his endurance was limitless. Rather than weaken him, the pain from his wounds only enraged him further and further.

Deathpatch was an all out aberration, and we were only average. Ogg was first. He took a swipe from Deathpatch's claws that ripped his face open. While Mary healed him, Michiki's left arm was cut deeply. And while Mary was treating Michiki, I got hit so hard it knocked me out cold.

I don't think I was out for any more than thirty seconds, but during that time, Ogg had been killed and Mutsumi was critically injured, with Mary trying desperately to save her life. Michiki was wounded all over trying to hold off Deathpatch by himself. When I came to, I frantically engaged Deathpatch, letting Michiki fall back.

With her last breath, Mutsumi cast a spell that seemed to make Deathpatch falter. That's what I saw, since that's what I wanted to believe, but he overwhelmed me soon enough.

"Mary, Michiki, hurry!" I yelled, over and over, not realizing the problem until Mary shouted back, "Hayashi, I'm sorry! I'm sorry! My magic, it's…"

You see, magic isn't something that you can use as much as you like. Mages and Priests expend spirit power in order to call on the gods and elementals from which magical energy originates. That much I thought I understood, but it turns out that I didn't really understand at all. Even if I did occasionally glimpse Mary or Mutsumi mediating to restore their spirit power, I never knew how much they had left—whether their store was more than ample, or just barely enough, at any given time.

Mutsumi and Mary never really gave us cause be concerned about things like that. I all knew was that Mutsumi would cast spells when we needed it and Mary would heal us when we needed it. I had no idea how hard it was on them. But I think that Mary had already used up much of her energy after the underlings had been taken care of. It was a long fight, and she had reached her limit.

Michiki saved Mary and me. Michiki told us to run, and then, mustering the last of his strength, turned to Deathpatch and starting throwing skill after skill at the kobold. Mary, she refused to leave and rushed at Deathpatch, but I stopped her and dragged her away.

I won't make any excuses. I left Michiki behind to die. He was already mortally wounded and wanted to use his life to give us a chance to get away. As his friend, I wanted to grant him his final wish.

I don't know how we managed to make it to the surface from the fifth stratum. It took us half a day, and there were times when we thought we were done for. We made it back, but we had lost ourselves.

Three of our friends, our precious companions, were gone forever in only moments. Mary especially was a mess afterwards. She was the Priest, the healer who was supposed to save lives, but she had let three people die and had her own skin saved instead. From that day on, I've never seen her smile again. Sometimes I don't even think I have the right to smile either.

After that, Shinohara found us and we joined Orion, but Mary left the clan before long. I think the companionship that Orion offered only came to cause her more pain. Mary ended up hopping from party to party, never staying in one for long; her reputation spread, but it didn't sound like the person I knew. I got worried and tried to talk to her but all she would say was that she was fine, fine, just fine.

It was like talking to a wall. I think that it must have broken her heart every time she saw me. To her, I was like proof, a symbol of a past that had been lost. But she needs a future, and it's not with me. To her, I'm as much of a ghost as Michiki, Mutsumi, and Ogg. There's no future for her in me.

She needs to find herself again. If she doesn't, she'll only sink deeper and deeper into the abyss and when she's so far down, so far down she can't move anymore, it will claim her."

Chapter 19: *Ad Interim*, Tomorrow

Before they met up with Mary at eight that morning—that is, before falling asleep the previous night—Haruhiro and the others racked their brains over what they would do, what they would say to her. But no one could think of anything. Then, when they reached Damroww's Old Town, they had to focus on work, and they didn't have the luxury to worry about anything else.

This crucial time for all of them seemed to fly by, and it wasn't until they returned to Altana in the evening that Haruhiro finally mustered up the resolve to approach Mary.

"Mary, there's something I want to talk to you about," Haruhiro said frankly, as they exited the store where they sold their day's loot.

"I see," Mary replied, bringing her arms around herself defensively. "Get on with it then."

Because everyone had been preoccupied last night with what turns their relationship with Mary might take, none of them could act like their normal selves around her today. They had heard Mary's story from Hayashi, and Mary couldn't have known that; but she couldn't have missed the change in everyone's behavior either, and she must have guessed something was up.

She probably thought that they were preparing to kick her out of the party. She was probably playing out the scenario in her mind now, Haruhiro saying, "Sorry Mary, but can I ask you to leave our party?"

And not wanting to make a fuss, she would immediately reply, "Fine," and take her leave of them.

She was steeling herself for the announcement, or so it seemed to Haruhiro. It had probably happened like that numerous times before, with many other parties. It was just too depressing, the way it always ended like that for her.

"Mary…" Haruhiro said, saying her name as a friend's, as one of them.

He met her eyes and held them, as if to say, *It's not what you think.* Mary's eyebrows narrowed slightly. Haruhiro wasn't alone in this intent gaze; Mogzo, Yume, Shihoru, and Ranta had their eyes locked on her too. She noticed their stares and stiffened, uneasy.*No, it's not what you think.…* Haruhiro repeated inwardly again.

"Mary," Haruhiro said, out loud this time. "We had a Priest in our party before. His name was Manato, and he died…or maybe a better way to put it is, we got him killed. You could say that he was almost a perfectionist, and we depended on him way too much. When we got hurt during fights, he would heal us even if it was just a scratch.

"Manato was our leader," said Haruhiro, "a healer we trusted, and he and Mogzo would always fight in the front, so he was a tank too. It was like he was three people in one. He was really an amazing person, but at the time, we didn't realize it. He was just an ordinary guy to us. I don't think any of it was easy on Manato, but he never showed it, and none of us ever tried to imagine how hard it really was for him. Even now, I don't think I can imagine…but he's dead. He's not here anymore."

Mary surely must have seen the similarities between herself and Manato. She might have even figured out that Haruhiro was telling her all this because they knew the story of her past.

Haruhiro had been debating it for some time. Having heard Hayashi's story, he had a pretty good idea of what happened to Mary, and he could kind of understand why she was the way she was. But should he tell Mary that he knew?

Something told him it wasn't as clear-cut as that, though.

"A" happened, therefore "B." Haruhiro knew that human beings were neither simple nor straightforward creatures, and he didn't pretend to be able to see into Mary's heart. No one was going to be so flippant as to claim they knew everything there was to know about her. So, the only thing he could tell her about was himself.

"To be honest, with Manato gone, I thought that it was over," began Haruhiro. "I thought that it was impossible to keep doing this without him. But even if he was dead, we were still alive. We had to live on, and we couldn't live on by sitting around. We stayed on as Crimson Moon trainees, if only to feed ourselves.

“Then we invited you the join the party. A party has to have a Priest, that was why. No other reason. Now, me, Ranta, Yume, and Shihoru, we were the good-for-nothing dregs from the start. Mogzo was different. He was recruited by Raghill, but got thrown out after they took all his money. Manato’s the one who brought us together, as ragtag as we might’ve been, and we became teammates, and friends too.

“That was all there was to it in the beginning. But since then, we’ve become a team for real. Sometimes things don’t go so great, sometimes we get angry, sometimes we fight, but in the end, we still consider each other friends. The circumstances that brought us together don’t matter. What matters is that here and now, everyone is my precious friend and companion. That includes you, Mary.”

Mary didn’t say a word. She stared long and hard at Haruhiro, motionless, except to blink now and then.

“Me too.” Shihoru quietly raised her hand. “I consider you a friend, too.”

“Agreed,” Yume smiled broadly. “Mary’s super adorable!”

“O-of course I agree.” Mogzo still had his barbute helm on. “Of course I consider you a friend. It’s reassuring for me to have you with us.”

Ranta harrumphed. “I’m… I’m… you know. I make a big fuss when I’m hurt. It’s something I need to work on… maybe. But, uhhh… yeah, I guess. Aren’t we friends?”

“Hell is gonna freeze over tomorrow,” Haruhiro said, looking up at the cloudless sky. “Ranta, admitting he’s not perfect. Hell, heaven, and earth are all gonna freeze over.”

“Hey! I admit all the time that I’ve got things I can improve on! My self-improvement talents are off the charts! You’ve known me*how* long and you still don’t know that?!”

“If you say so, then, sure.”

“Oy! Haruhiro! Don’t just leave it at that! You make me sad!”

“I think it’s a good idea to set a goal for ourselves sooner rather than later,” Haruhiro continued. “Even if it’s a temporary goal…”

He stole a glance at Mary. She looked unaffected so far, still staring intently at him. He hoped that she wasn’t intending to rebuff them and their offers of friendship. It would be a good enough start for her not to.

“…Everything’s become muddled recently,” Haruhiro said. “I don’t even think we’re working like crazy to save up enough to buy our Crimson Moon contracts anymore. We’re just going from day to day with no real purpose. Let’s stop that and at least figure out the direction we want to go next.”

“Our goal’s to become BILLIONAIRES! Then WORLD DOMINATION!!!”

Haruhiro thoroughly ignored Ranta and proposed his thoughts to everyone. Everyone except the irritatingly loud Ranta and the deathly silent Mary agreed.

“I don’t care about anything other than money and power,” Ranta declared. “And being popular with girls too, I guess. But girls come with money and power so…” He paused. “I guess your idea for a goal is okay for something to do before the start of the beginning of the first step towards world domination… I *guess*…” he said grudgingly.

Yume heaved a heavy sigh. “Ranta’s talk is longer than long-winded and more monotonous than a monologue.”

There they go again, Haruhiro thought, and turned to Mary. “Mary, what do you think?”

Mary, avoiding his gaze, seemed to give the slightest of small nods. He took it as a sign of her agreement.

“Would you like to eat dinner with us tonight?” he asked.

“No thanks.” Then she added, in the quietest of voices, “…not yet, anyway.”

“Alright.”

What did you expect? Haruhiro told himself. *It’s not like everything will magically fix themselves instantly, just with that.* But of course he was impatient.

No one knew when their time together would come to an end. They had burned up some of that precious time already, just to take this first step forward. And who knew if their end was already near, having pursued them all this while?

But one step was still a step. For Haruhiro and the others, incompetents beyond incompetent, one small step at a time was their only way forward.

And if his ears hadn’t deceived him, just before Mary turned away to leave, she had whispered, “See you tomorrow.”

Indeed. *Ad interim*, tomorrow comes.

Chapter 20: Not-Quite-Glories of the Goblin Slayers

They got up with the six o’clock morning bell and ate breakfast on the go, getting ready for the day. At eight o’clock, it was to Altana’s northern gate to meet with Mary, and then off towards Damroww’s Old Town. The map they were making of the area was still incomplete, so they worked it as they searched for goblins.

At their level now, they could take on groups of up to three—not without difficulty, but at least without it being overly risky. The exception was when this included a light and agile “evader” goblin. With those they had to be extra cautious. Also, from time to time they would encounter goblins wielding ranged weapons; usually crude short bows. But arrows shot from those had neither speed nor much piercing power, and so weren’t anything to be overly worried about.

Crossbows were what they had to be wary of. A well-placed shot from a crossbow meant instant death. Heavily armored goblins were also sometimes a problem, as some of them were very strong, making it a huge mistake to underestimate them.

The upper limit for their party was four goblins. Even so, they chose to pass up groups of four unless the fighting conditions were exceedingly favorable. Groups of five they pretended to not have even seen, and when goblins assembled in groups of six or more, the whole place was best considered goblin family territory—or clan territory, or whatever. These areas would be full of large groups and trying to take on one group was like walking into a den of not one pride of sleeping lions, but several.

Goblins that wandered around alone were usually poorly equipped and poorly armed, but sometimes they kept highly valuable items hidden in their pouches. No one would think to steal from the poor, so it was protecting their valuables by appearing to be poor, perhaps.

And once a day, every day, they went *there*.

Goblins could be categorized into two major types: the ones who stayed put, and the ones who roamed. *They* were the latter type.*They* could be found *there* only every so often. When Haruhiro and the others watched them from a distance, the urge to take action would be almost overwhelming. But they couldn't. Now wasn't the time. They had to be patient.

It's not as if there was anything stopping them. At the moment, Haruhiro's party was the only one operating in the Damroww Old Town area. With no other groups to take them out, they could take time building up their strength before they took on the offensive.

Lastly, though it wasn't every day—when they returned to Altana, the team would head to Sherry's Tavern. They didn't really go for any specific purpose, but just to drink and talk. Mary never really said much, but she was a thousand times better than the overly boisterous, highly annoying Ranta.

Every time they were at Sherry's, at least one or two other Crimson Moon members would approach to ridicule them with "Hey, Goblin Slayers," or "How's it going, Goblin Slayers," or "Having fun in Damroww, Goblin Slayers?"

Ranta would always shoot back with a *shut up!* but Haruhiro knew if he got upset every time, the teasing would never end. And really, the nickname didn't even bother Haruhiro that much; it wasn't fancy and had a nice sort of ring to it.

The Goblin Slayers. Not bad. Not bad at all. They would become the best goblin slayers in all of Crimson Moon.

It was goblins the day after that, and goblins the day after that one too. Goblins, goblins, goblinsgoblinsgoblins. In the beginning, all the goblins looked the same, but after a while Haruhiro could start to tell individuals apart from each other. He noticed that the vast majority of those they encountered were male, with females hardly anywhere to be found.

According to Mary, the majority of the females were taken by high-ranking goblins as wives, dwelling in the newer parts of Damroww.

"Man, I want a harem like that for myself too…"

"I'd feel bad for female goblins if they were in your harem, Ranta," said

Haruhiro.

“Stupid Haruhiro!” Ranta barked. “Didn’t you know? Even goblins find me irresistible beyond irresistible beyond irresistible! Don’t insult Ranta, the Wandering Irresistible King!”

“Weird… for an Irresistible King, all the serving girls at the tavern sure have a way of thoroughly ignoring you when you flirt with them-yan,” Yume remarked.

“Er… Um… Well, even undefeatable generals can lose a battle once in a while…”

“Oh, I see that even the Irresistible King can be resisted-yan… even though Ranta’s the irresistible beyond irresistible beyond irresistible of Irresistible Kings,” Yume mused.

“Quit it with the ‘irresistible beyond irresistible’! You’re saying that ‘cause you just don’t get how irresistible I am ‘cause you’re a stupid booger! People who get it, get it!” Ranta turned to Mary angrily. “Mary! If you had no choice but to choose one of the three of us guys here, who would you pick? OF COURSE IT WOULD BE ME!”

“I would choose Mogzo,” came Mary’s smooth reply.

“What—!” Ranta squeaked.

“M-me?” Mogzo stared in wide-eyed disbelief, more astonished than embarrassed.

“Huh?” Haruhiro looked blankly from Mogzo to Mary several times.

Yume’s expression seemed to indicate that she was deep in thought while Shihoru blinked repeatedly, her eyes never leaving Mary.

“Oy! Oy-oy-oy-oy-oy-oy-oy!” Ranta would have bitten his own tongue off if he’d oy-ed any faster. “What?! Why?! Mogzo over me? No way! Not possible!”

“He’s big and charming,” Mary said, calm and collected as ever.

“Size?! Size doesn’t matter! No way it can possibly matter… fuuuuuck… I just

lost to goddamn Mogzo! What the fuck!”

“Too bad for you, Irresistible King,” Yume said.

“Quit rubbing it in and calling me Irresistible King, Bitsy Boobs!”

Haruhiro was shocked that he too had lost to Mogzo. So Mary wasn’t the type who cared about appearance alone. Maybe it was because she looked at her own gorgeously featured face in the mirror every day, so she didn’t seek the same level of beauty in others. But it wasn’t like either Ranta or Haruhiro were good-looking either, so looks probably didn’t factor in this particular case anyway.

Haruhiro’s looks and intellect were about as mediocre as mediocre could be, but he didn’t lack self-confidence when it came to fighting goblins. He fought them day after day after every single day. *Careful not to get cocky,* he told himself. He wasn’t like Renji or Manato, or even Mary, who all possessed… things he didn’t.

Before, when Manato was still alive, he had let Haruhiro play piggyback and get carried along. Now though, it was like Haruhiro was a wobbly legged toddler cum Goblin Slayer trying to walk on his own. For a nothing-more-than-mediocre guy like Haruhiro, overconfidence meant failure. Hell, he could fail even if he wasn’t overconfident. At the very least, he needed to be on his toes at all times.

As for money, on a good day they would earn about ten silvers overall, which meant he pocketed two. It seemed that Mary had permanent housing somewhere but Haruhiro and the others were still living in that cheap inn for Crimson Moon members. He kept the money he spent on food under twenty capas a day, and whatever remained, he used for himself or for the party.

There were two other things that necessitated a monetary investment, and those were equipment and skills. Haruhiro had purchased for himself a secondhand vest, protective waistband, and forearm and shin guards. All were crafted from hardened leather, light and flexible so as to not impede movement. The higher protection potential the leather gear gave was more a psychological boon than real physical protection, but a little more peace of mind during fights was important too.

As for his dagger, he had no intention of getting a new one yet. He had gotten used to the feel of his old one, and if he took it to a smithy, a knife sharpener would be able to put a new edge on it. Any extra money he had was better spent

on helping Mogzo get his equipment.

Mogzo was attempting to piece together the thing he had wanted most: plate armor. In reality, proper plate armor was supposed to be custom forged for its wearer, but asking an armorer to make a set for him would cost more than ten golds at the very least. Of course that was an impossible sum, so Mogzo bought everything used and took them to a blacksmith to get the size adjusted. And even this cost several tens of silvers per piece.

So far, he had a breastplate and backplate, shoulder pauldrons, vambraces, and half-greaves that covered his shins to the top of his foot. All of those he wore over his chainmail. As for a helmet, he was still using the barbute from before. His blade, still the same bastard sword that his guild gave him, was getting quite worn down; it would have to be replaced soon.

Ranta had bought himself chainmail and, for some reason, wore his leather armor over it. Perhaps Ranta thought it was cool because it had Skulheill's emblem on it. He had also gotten himself a helm shaped like an upside-down bucket, which apparently he liked, but was just plain weird to everyone else—this he wore to fights. He had also stumbled upon a sort of nice-looking longsword at the marketplace and bought it on impulse, which left him with utterly zero funds.

Stupid. Incredibly stupid thing to do, Haruhiro had thought.

Yume had gotten hardened leather armor for her upper and lower body, and Haruhiro had to admit, she wore it very well. She had also gotten herself a hooded cloak, which made her overall appearance very Hunter-like indeed.

The mage's robes and hat Shihoru had received from her guild were so worn, tears were opening up all over the place, so she got herself a new set. Her staff remained without replacement, as shadow magic, unlike the other schools of magic, was not affected by the quality of the staff. In fact, shadow magic didn't require a staff at all. Shihoru had also learned a new spell, [PHANTOM SLEEP].

Haruhiro had asked Master Barbara teach him [STEALTH WALK] and [SWAT], Mogzo had learned [WAR CRY], and Ranta had picked up [JUKE STAB] and [PROPEL LEAP]. Yume learned [SHARP SIGHT] which improved her accuracy with the bow and also let her avoid incoming attacks with a swiftness akin to pit rats. Mary was already heads and shoulders above everything else in

terms of both ability and experience.

There was no doubt that their fighting potential as a party had gone up, but by how much?

They had found a band of five goblins in what was once a smithy on the west side of Damroww's Old Town. The building was half crumbled and the roof was completely gone, but remains of the furnace, anvil, and other tools still remained. Haruhiro and the others had come to this place many times before; sometimes for a work break, other times to stop for lunch. Until now, they had never seen any goblins there.

It seemed that there was a large social gap between the goblins who lived in the new part of Damroww and those who loitered around Old Town. In the fights for supremacy that occurred between the upper class goblins, those who lost were no longer considered part of the group, and were banished. In other words, Old Town was where the exile goblins lurked.

Those five goblins occupying the abandoned smithy now must have been newcomers, freshly exiled. The first thing newcomers did was to find a place to live and, if the group was big enough, stake a territorial claim on the surrounding area. Haruhiro guessed that they might be intending to use what remained of the building as a base.

Haruhiro finished scouting the area and returned to where the others were waiting, a little ways away.

"Let's try it," Haruhiro proposed. "There's five of them. One's wearing chainmail and is armed with a crossbow. The others are equipped with leather armor. One has a spear, one's got a short sword with a buckler, the other two have a hatchet and a sword. I think the crossbow goblin's probably the leader. It'll be a tough fight, but it might be a good chance to test ourselves…"

"Interesting…" Ranta licked his lips and rested a hand on the great helm lying next to him. "We should go for it. A few more and I'll have over forty-one Vices. When I do, I can summon Zodiac in the afternoons too…" he said, chuckling softly.

Yume glared coldly at him. "Is Zodiac going to actually do anything for us then? Right now, he just super occasionally whispers stuff to our opponents to distract

them, but that's it. *Super* occasionally."

"It surprises them, doesn't it?! When he levels up, he'll sorta yank on an opponent's arm or leg too, now and then! He'll hinder their movements… when he feels like it!"

Shihoru smiled wearily, as if tired of hearing the same thing over and over. "… Capricious as ever."

"And uhh… one more thing. Yeah. He'll only do it in the evenings. Before evening it's, erm… what we were saying earlier. Whisper attacks and he'll warn us if enemies are near and umm… Demon jokes. When he feels like it."

Mary sneered. "Capricious is right."

"Shut it!" Ranta put on his helm, switching on bucket mode. "You guys don't know anything about Zodiac! And it doesn't matter if you don't because I'm the only one who truly understands him! Heh. The lonely life of a Dread Knight. Or is it lonesome life…"
"I-I'll take as many of them at once as I can," Mogzo said, nodding vigorously. "Two for sure. And if I have to, I'll use [WARCRY] to intimidate them."

Shihoru renewed her grip on her staff and gave a short nod. "I'll use my magic and put one to sleep right at the start."

"Good," said Haruhiro, nodding. "Sleep the crossbow-goblin then, Shihoru. Taking that one down in one shot, or failing to, makes a huge difference."

"I understand," Shihoru replied. "Leave it to me."

Yume spoke up. "Yume will attack with bow and arrow first, then close in and take on one."

"I'll keep on trying to get in position behind the goblins and kill any if I have the chance," Haruhiro said. "And Mary…"

When Haruhiro met her gaze, Mary nodded to him. He noticed that she was quieter than before, but she also responded with a real answer whenever she was asked something, and she did her job properly.

She didn’t participate in fights in the way that Hayashi had described, but the shift in style was probably due to the massively disastrous ending of her time with her old party. Her attitude towards Haruhiro and the others was still lukewarm at best, but he believed now that they could trust her to do her job as a Priest. If she would only smile for them, maybe once every couple of days, he could ask for no more.

“Let’s do this,” Haruhiro looked at each of his companions in turn and put his right hand out for their prefight ritual.

Ranta, Mogzo, Yume, and Shihoru did the same, stacking their hands on top of Haruhiro’s. Finally, Mary added her hand over theirs as well.

They weren’t that far from the abandoned smithy, so Haruhiro kept his voice low and whispered, “Fight!” To which everyone else responded equally softly, “All or nothing!”

Haruhiro led the way with Yume and Shihoru, while Ranta, Mary, and Mogzo followed. Haruhiro crouched low and kept his knees limber, making no sound as he moved using [STEALTH WALK]. Yume and Shihoru were not Thieves, so they couldn’t imitate the technique even if they tried, but they placed their feet where Haruhiro had as they followed. The reduction in noise was still significant.

They moved from the shadows of the ruined building to directly under its cover, sliding along a crumbling fence and concealing themselves behind a large pile of rubble. They were within [PHANTOM SLEEP]’s casting range, about sixty-five feet away.

Only two of the walls on the smithy’s actual building still stood, and even those were full of holes. The remainder of the building had been reduced to nothing but rubble, so from their vantage point, they they could see four goblins, and thus four potential targets.

Haruhiro hand signaled Yume and Shihoru, who then poked their heads out of cover. Yume readied her bow and, closing her eyes, took a deep breath. When her eyelids fluttered open, [SHARP SIGHT] had been activated. From what Haruhiro understood, [SHARP SIGHT] was a skill that increased visual acuity using specialized eye movement and specialized perception.

In the meantime, Shihoru was already drawing an elemental glyph with her staff, chanting quietly, “Oom rel eckt krom dash.”

The shadow elemental, a black hazy ball, burst from the tip of the staff. This spell didn’t fire nearly as fast as [SHADOW ECHO], so it was easily dodged by enemies that saw it coming. *It’ll be fine,* Haruhiro told himself. *It’ll hit.*

And it did. The shadow elemental hit the crossbow-goblin directly in the face and seeped into its body through its ears, nose, and mouth. The goblin immediately began to sway unsteadily. The spear-goblin sitting against the wall noticed, and it jumped to its feet just as Yume made her shot.

The arrow buried itself in the goblin’s shoulder, sending it staggering back down.

“Mogzo, Ranta!” Haruhiro shouted.

Mogzo and Ranta rushed into the smithy ruins, yelling spirited battle cries at the top of their lungs. The crossbow-goblin was now prone on the ground, fast asleep. It was a much deeper sleep than the normal kind, but it would awaken if, say, given a hard kick. They had to finish the fight before its lackeys managed to rouse it.

Haruhiro and Yume followed behind Mogzo and Ranta. Mogzo, shouting “THANK YOU”, used [RAGE CLEAVE] on the hatchet-goblin, stunning it and making it stumble. Ranta attacked the sword-goblin with [ANGER THRUST], but missed.

Mogzo then rushed past the hatchet-goblin, who had not yet managed to recover, to attack the buckler-goblin. The buckler-goblin brought its shield up to block Mogzo’s attack as it retreated. Without a moment’s delay, Mogzo then turned back to the hatchet-goblin, slashing with his sword. Good to his word, he was taking on two goblins at the same time.

Ranta was fighting the sword-goblin, and Yume was rushing towards the spear-goblin that she had shot earlier. Haruhiro took a brief glance at Shihoru and Mary. Mary held her staff at the ready, watching the fight with such a deadly serious expression that it was scary. If any of the goblins attempted to get close to Shihoru, Haruhiro knew that Mary would protect her.

As a Mage, Shihoru had almost no armor, but if she knew that Mary would

protect her in a pinch, she could fight confidently. But Haruhiro didn't intend to let it come to the point where Mary was forced to intervene.

"Take them down!" Haruhiro confirmed the positions of both his companions and the enemy goblins once more, trying to determine which goblin he should focus on…

Him. The hatchet goblin. Neither walking nor running, Haruhiro crouched low and moved as if sliding along the ground. He wasn't quite using the [STEALTH WALK] technique, but something close to it. Soon, he was in position directly at the hatchet goblin's back.

It was in that moment.

Haruhiro saw a line of light and it was as if the goblin's boney back was a zoomed-in photograph. It wasn't really light, however, just something only describable as light; it was a colorless line that streaked to a single point at the hatchet-goblin's back.

He had no idea what this line of light was. It didn't appear every time, or even frequently for that matter, but recently, he had been seeing one every now and then. It disappeared just as fast as it came, but when it did appear, he knew. Without knowing why, without understanding how, he knew what do to. If he drove his dagger along the line of light to where it ended, his blade would slide into the flesh of his target like a hot knife through butter.

He knew the exact spot to stab, but before his brain could process that information and tell his body to move, his blade had already pierced the hatchet goblin, as if something had been guiding its tip. The hatchet-goblin let out a short groan and was dead before it even hit the ground.

The buckler-goblin backed up, perhaps unnerved after seeing its partner instantly killed. It had taken less than half a step back, but of course Mogzo took advantage of the opening. He brought his blade down on the buckler-goblin's buckler with all his strength, stripping it off its arm; then he charged the now bucklerless buckler-goblin.

The bucklerless-goblin attacked with its sword immediately, but Mogzo didn't even try to avoid it. He simply let his plate armor deflect the incoming blow, then returned the blow with one that knocked the bucklerless-goblin off its feet.

He brought his sword up high and swung it down on the bucklerless-goblin's head so hard that he cracked its skull wide open.

Three more to go.

"[PROPEL LEAP]!" Ranta stuck his tongue out and leaped backwards with a tremendous amount of force.

[PROPEL LEAP] was a specialized movement skill that allowed him to instantaneously put distance between himself and his opponent. The goblin chased after Ranta, as if sucked in by a vacuum, which was exactly what Ranta wanted. He grinned broadly and backed up a little more, then suddenly thrust his longsword forward, yelling "[JUKE STAB]!"

All of the goblin's momentum was directed completely forward, making it impossible to dodge Ranta's attack. Ranta's longsword went straight into its throat and out the back of its neck. Laughing, he kicked the goblin off his blade, giving the sword a twist as he pulled it out.

The sound of Ranta's wild laughter however, was half-drowned out by Shihoru's incantation. "Oom rel eckt vel dash!"

[SHADOW ECHO]. A shadow elemental shot out from the tip of her staff and hit the spear-goblin square in the chest. Yume closed in on the spear-goblin, whose entire body was now quivering uncontrollably due to [SHADOW ECHO]'s ultrasonic sound waves.

Yume slapped away its spear with her kukri then followed up immediately with a vicious slash to the base of its neck. Her blade sank deep into it and it was unable to attack back, only shriek in rage. By the time its voice had fallen silent, its end already awaited, in the form of Mogzo.

Mogzo stepped in firmly, bringing his sword down on the spear goblin. "THANK YOU!"—and finished it in a single stroke.

"We can do this," Haruhiro breathed, nodding. "We can definitely do this."

"About time," Ranta replied, making his way to the still sleeping crossbow-goblin. He raised his sword, grinning.

Haruhiro thought that perhaps one day, that smile would come to resemble the ones put on by cruel, cold-hearted villains, just like Ranta wanted; but it wasn't today.

"But whatever," Ranta continued. "This is The End. Not just for this goblin, but for *them* too."

Chapter 21: The Fine Line Between Innocence

Things were always easier said than done, though.

Haruhiro gulped reflexively. He had worked up the resolve and set off to scout *that* place, only to find himself in for a surprise.

“No way…” he whispered to himself. He had never even imagined the possibility of something like this happening. “There’s more of them…”

On the balconied second story of the two-storied stone building, the plate-armored goblin lounged, looking self-important. On the ground floor was the large hobgoblin, still outfitted with full chainmail and helm. Haruhiro had expected those two to be there, but loitering around the outskirts of the building were two more. They both wore helms and chainmail as well, with shields in one hand, spears in the other, and even short swords at their waists.

They were sentries, for sure.

The armored goblin on the second floor wasn’t just sitting on the ground, either. He was in a proper chair, one leg bent and the other stretched out in front of him. Where had he gotten that chair? It sure wasn’t there before.

Could the armored goblin possibly be planning to gather underlings and expand its power? There was no way to know without actually asking the goblin himself, not that communicating with it was even possible, but either way, this was not a good sign.

Haruhiro returned to his companions and reported his findings.

“So… it’s not two like we thought, it’s four. And it’s just a guess, but I think their numbers will keep increasing.”

“Four goblins.” Mary closed her eyes, eyebrows knit tightly in thought.

“Hmm…” Yume puffed her cheeks out round, while Shihoru dropped her gaze with a sigh.

Mogzo tapped his barbute helm.

“What’s the matter with you guys?” Ranta scoffed. “Don’t be frickin’ scared. There’s nothing we can do about their numbers. Quit acting so pathetic, retainers of Lord Ranta!”

“Since when did we become your—” Haruhiro began, then thought better of it. “Whatever, never mind.”

“Don’t stop halfway,” Ranta baited. “C’mon! Where’s the straight-man comeback? We can’t be rivals like this! There’s no way a peon like you can take away Lord Ranta’s reason for living!”

Haruhiro ignored him and instead looked at Mogzo, Yume, Shihoru, and Mary in turn. “If we assume my guess that we’ll have even more of them later, we need to make a decision now. It doesn’t have to be at this very moment—we can wait a little longer—but should we go for it, or give up? I don’t think I want to give up. We could definitely take four, as we are now.

Mary looked steadily at him, her eyes trapping his gaze. “Your basis for that?”

“Mogzo has much better defense now, and now that he doesn’t have to worry about protecting himself all the time, he’s got more offensive potential too. Shihoru can always take one goblin completely out of the fight, and Yume’s bow arm has gotten way more reliable. With [SWAT], even I can take one on directly. And we’ve got you now too, Mary.”

“Hey! What about me?” Ranta protested. “Why wasn’t I in there, huh? HUH?!”

“You shouldn’t…” Mary turned her face and looked at the ground. “You shouldn’t depend on me. I’m… I’m a Priest who let her teammates die.”

“And we’re a team that let our Priest die. I don’t think we want that to ever happen again. Never. It’s the same for you, right? I believe in you, Mary.”

Mary didn’t reply. She bit her lip, as if trying to keep… *something* under control. Yume and Shihoru placed their hands on her shoulders.

“I’m gonna say it right here and now,” Ranta said, shoving his thumb at his chest. “I ain’t gonna die even if I’m killed. I’m a man unknown to death, so don’t do worthless shit like *worry* about me.”

When Mary looked up again, her eyes narrowed the tiniest bit, and the corners of her mouth quivered ever so slightly. Was that… could it really be… a smile?

Haruhiro couldn’t say for sure, it was so modest, but he wanted to believe that it was. It vanished as quickly as it came, and Haruhiro regretted not holding her gaze.

“I understand,” said Mary with a nod. “I won’t let any of my companions die again. I’ll protect everyone, so rest assured.”

“Alright then.” When Haruhiro stretched out his right hand, so did everyone else; they stacked their hands on top of his for their ‘Fight! All or nothing!’ prefight ritual.

Right after, Mary, tilting her head remarked, “I always thought it rather strange. Why do you guys say ‘Fight. All or nothing?’”

The others returned her gaze with smiles, and they began steeling themselves for the upcoming fight as they went over their strategy once again. This was it. Yes, today was the day they had been planning for, preparing for.

Since the number of enemies had increased, they had had to make a few adjustments, but there was no need to make a new plan from scratch. Their first priority was to break through the sentries and get to the plate-armored goblin and the hobgoblin. In terms of strength, the sentries were small fry.

To whatever possible extent, they would engage and finish the two sentries quickly, and then move to the real targets. All of them had long discussed how they would defeat the plate-armored goblin and hobgoblin, and this was the culmination of all their meetings, all their planning.

They could do it. They would definitely win.

As usual Haruhiro led the way, with Yume and Shihoru close behind, while Mogzo, Ranta, and Mary followed at a distance. The first obstacle was to get within range for Shihoru to use her [PHANTOM SLEEP] spell; a minimum of

sixty-five feet. Up to about one hundred and twenty feet there was a wall that would conceal their presence, but after that there was nothing but open ground up until the building itself.

However, after numerous simulations around the building and its wider surroundings, they had found that if they took a certain path all the way around to the other side, they could approach within thirty feet of the building without being seen. It was there that the three of them came to a stop, behind a large pile of debris.

Here. It was here they would commence the attack.

When Haruhiro gave the signal, Yume readied her bow and activated [SHARP SIGHT] while Shihoru refreshed her grip on her staff and took a deep breath.

At last. The plate armored goblin and the hobgoblin would meet their end today. They were the ones who killed Manato. Haruhiro and the others did their best to not treat it as retaliation or revenge, because hatred would interfere with clear thinking. Those two weren't their hated adversaries; merely enemies. Strong enemies. A barrier that they had no choice but to overcome.

Haruhiro stuck his head out from behind the debris, and—

His breath caught in his throat. Panicking, he quickly withdrew. The plate armored goblin had been looking straight at him.

"We've been spotted…" he whispered.

But how? Had the plate armored goblin somehow sensed their presence? Maybe they had been spotted just out of coincidence; maybe the plate armored goblin just happened to be looking in their direction when Haruhiro had poked his head out.

He didn't know, but it didn't matter. He risked another quick glance and withdrew again just as quickly, this time gasping, short and harsh. The plate-armored goblin had a crossbow in its hands now, and it was aiming it straight at them.

"…What do we do now?" Yume said, lowering her bow.

Shihoru's face had gone pale; she had shrunk even further behind cover.

Did Ranta and the others, holding position a little further away, realize their situation? Probably not. They were concealed in the shadows on the building's perimeter wall, and most likely couldn't see from where they were.

What do we do? What should we do?

Fall back? No, they couldn't. The plate-armored goblin had shouted something. An order. It must have been to the hobgoblin and the sentries. In another few moments, they would be attacked. Retreat was no longer an option. They had to engage, but the problem was the crossbow. If one of them got hit with a crossbow bolt, it could be fatal.

"Leave it to Yume," Yume suddenly said.

"What?!" Before Haruhiro could stop her, she had already set her bow down and jumped out from behind the debris. The plate armored goblin shot a bolt at her, but she curled and rolled forward with tremendous speed.

Pit rats. Back in the forest, those pit rats—and the skill the pit rats had used, moving and protecting themselves all at once. Did Yume mimic that movement to deflect the crossbow bolt? It sure seemed like it.

Haruhiro rapped Shihoru on the shoulder. "Use your magic!"

"R-right!" Shihoru emerged from behind the debris, chanting the spell as she sketched the elemental glyph with her staff. "Oom rel eckt krom dash!"

The frizzy black shadow elemental soared towards the plate armored goblin. The hobgoblin downstairs had picked up its club, but still hadn't moved; the two sentry goblins, however, were making their way towards Haruhiro and the others. It didn't matter. If they could just put the plate armored goblin to sleep, they could still…

"Whoa!" Haruhiro exclaimed.

The plate armored goblin had jumped from the second floor down to the first. The shadow elemental flew through thin air at the spot the goblin had occupied just moments before, its frizzy form fading, then disappearing altogether.

They had messed up. Messed up badly. It was no good. They had failed. *No! We can still do this.* They could recover, regain the initiative. *Don't panic!* Haruhiro drew his dagger.

"Attack!" he shouted. "Shihoru, fall back to Mary's position!"

"Alright!"

Ranta and Mogzo had come from behind the perimeter wall, and Yume used that pit rat-like movement again to avoid an incoming sentry's spear. The other sentry goblin was coming straight towards Haruhiro.

What about the plate armored goblin and the hobgoblin? Damn it. He didn't have time to confirm their positions. Spear! The sentry goblin's spear was coming right at him; Haruhiro struck it with his dagger.

The [SWAT] skill from the Thieves' fighting techniques wasn't a hard-hitting attack. Rather, it made opponents lose their balance and fall to the ground, and it inflicted critical injuries. However, the sentry goblin was fairly strong and no matter how many times Haruhiro landed the skill on the sentry goblin's spear, it kept coming at him. It was not a run-of-the-mill, average goblin.

"I'll take both of them!" Mogzo yelled.

Mogzo was intending to take on the plate armored goblin and the hobgoblin at the same time? No way. Not possible. But plate armored goblin or hobgoblin, the only one who could directly take on either one of them was Mogzo. That's why their plan had been to incapacitate the plate armored goblin right at the start. That was the point on which their entire plan hinged.

—A plan that had fallen apart right at the start. Wasn't it better to have retreated right away? But it was too late and there was no use for regret now.

"That's—!" Haruhiro used [SWAT] as he fell back. And fell back. And fell back again.

It seemed that Ranta and Yume were taking on the other sentry goblin. Shihoru had cast [PHANTOM SLEEP] again, but this time aimed it at the hobgoblin rather than the plate armored. The spell hit the hobgoblin squarely and it began to doze, but before it was completely asleep the plate armored goblin smacked

the hobgoblin on the rear with the flat of its sword, waking it up.

It knows about our spells, Haruhiro thought. It was like the plate armored goblin could see all the cards in their hand.

“Yume!” Ranta shouted angrily. “We’re never gonna kill it if you keep running around it! Quit that and hit it already, idiot!”

“Shut up!” she shouted back. “Yume doesn’t want to hear that from you!”

Yume tried to dodge using the pit rat roll again, but this time she was a bit slow. Or maybe the sentry goblin had gotten used to seeing her do it. Yume gasped as the sentry’s spear connected with her shoulder. Not just connecting—but gouging.

“Fuck! Yume what the fuck!” Ranta jumped in, attacking the goblin with a diagonal slash of his longsword.”[HATRED’S CUT]!”

The sentry goblin blocked using its buckler, grunting in exertion. It shifted its grip on the spear, choking farther up, and counter-attacked with a thrust. Thrust, sweep, thrust. Ranta, after barely deflecting the stream of attacks, braced his legs and shot away.

“[PROPEL LEAP]! Get over here!” Ranta taunted, but paused. “What?! Why isn’t it coming after me?!”

“Because it sees right through your tricks!” Haruhiro spat, [SWAT]-ing, [SWAT]-ing, [SWAT]-ing again.

Meanwhile, Mary was chanting an invocation. “O light, under the divine grace of Lord Luminous… [HEAL]!”

Yume was rapidly enveloped in a warm light. Unlike [CURE], [HEAL] didn’t require the Priest to hold their hand close over the injury. It could be used to heal a wounded person from a distance, and it was effective for injuries anywhere on the body. [HEAL] was a spell that Manato hadn’t possessed.

Yume was right-handed and the injury to her shoulder must have been serious, so Mary probably decided to heal her right away. With that, Yume could probably rejoin the fight in another moment or two. But now Mogzo was the one in

trouble.

He had somehow avoided the swings of the hobgoblin's club, but he was taking hit after hit from the plate armored one's sword. Even if it was just one sentry, they had to dispatch them fast to go help him. Was there no way? Some means, some method?

Haruhiro couldn't just sit back and think, of course. He was forced into [SWAT]-ing again and again to deflect the sentry goblin's attacks. His breathing was becoming ragged and his hand was going numb. If he messed up now, it was over. He felt as if he was teetering on the edge of panic.

Don't give in. Hang in there. Gotta hang in there… But even if he told himself that, what were they going to do?

"Haru!" Someone had called his name. Not his proper name, but his nickname. Someone who had never used it before. Mary. The voice belonged to Mary.

He didn't have the luxury of sparing a glance in her direction, but she had called his name. He guessed that she probably wanted him to reach her. So, still [SWAT]-ing, he gradually made his way to Mary and Shihoru, drawing the sentry goblin in with him.

When he thought he was close enough he stopped.

When Mary yelled "Switch with me!", Haruhiro jumped to the side just as Mary stepped in. She stopped the sentry goblin's spear with her staff—but no, she didn't just stop it. "[COUNTER STRIKE]!"

For a split second, it looked as if their weapons had merely bounced off each other, but then Mary, carrying all the momentum of the rebound, jammed her staff directly into the sentry goblin's chest. It wheezed sharply and backed off.

Now! It was that or never. Guessing Haruhiro's intention, Mary continued to press the attack on the sentry. The sentry had now switched to a defensive stance, leaving no way for Mary to break through, but she had done enough: Haruhiro was now in position at the sentry goblin's back.

C'mon, c'mon! Appear! He wished with all his will for that guiding line of colorless light to appear. But it didn't. There was nothing. But even though it

didn’t show, things weren’t necessarily hopeless.

Haruhiro slammed the dagger into the sentry’s back with the full force of his body weight, but because of the goblin’s armor, the dagger didn’t penetrate very deep. The goblin howled, but Haruhiro immediately snaked his other arm in a chokehold around the sentry goblin’s neck, as he pulled his dagger out—but only halfway. He then thrust the blade back in. Again and again, over and over, he stabbed the goblin just so as it shrieked and flailed wildly in his embrace.

He kept going until he felt the goblin’s full weight collapsed upon him.

“Thanks, Mary!” Haruhiro heaved, dumping the finally lifeless and unmoving body of the sentry goblin to the ground.

He glanced around and saw that Yume and Ranta were still struggling to take the remaining sentry down. Mogzo grunted with exertion as he blocked the hobgoblin’s club with his bastard sword, staggering.

“Mogzo!” Haruhiro rushed towards him, but he didn’t make it in time.

The plate armored goblin leapt in, and rather than slash at Mozgo, it smashed him in the head with its blade. Sparks flew where edge of sword hit barbute helm. No matter how good a helm was, no one could be fine after taking a blow like that. Mozgo reeled, but he swung his sword wildly as he did, forcing both the two goblins to back off.

Mogzo’s breath came in ragged gasps. He didn’t seem to be bleeding anywhere, but Haruhiro was sure that if were he to remove his armor, his body would be covered in bruises. Haruhiro had no doubt that Mogzo was having the hardest time of all. But even so, he kept swinging his bastard sword at the goblins.

“I’m fine!” he shouted between swings, tone uncharacteristically ablaze. “This is—this is nothing!”

Something seemed to have changed in him.

This was still bad. No matter what Mogzo claimed, there was no way he could keep holding out alone. Should Haruhiro help? He was armed only with a dagger. It wasn’t going to be easy, was impossible even, to pierce that plate armor, to fatally hurt that large hobgoblin body.

“Ranta, go back up Mozgo!” Haruhiro bellowed. “I’ll take your place!”

“Ha! The lead actor’s finally arrived!” Ranta quipped, closing the distance between him and the plate armored goblin in three quick hops. “[ANGER THRUST]!”

The plate armored goblin parried Ranta’s attack with ease, but at the very least, Ranta had managed to take its attention off Mogzo.

“Hey! What the—!” It showered Ranta with a flurry of attacks, and suddenly he was thrown onto the defensive, unable to attack back.

Hang in there, Ranta. And don’t die… With Ranta’s help, some of the pressure had been taken off Mozgo, but that didn’t change that if they didn’t take down the remaining sentry soon, things were going to go downhill fast.

The sentry goblin still had a firm hold on its small shield, and all its vital points were protected by armor. Yume wasn’t a tank, so there was no easy way for Haruhiro to get in position at its rear. But as Haruhiro considered his options, the sentry goblin turned towards him and raised its spear to throw.

It’s aiming for me?! No way!

Haruhiro twisted to avoid it, but not fast enough. The spear grazed him in the side of his ribs and then slammed point first into the ground. A groan of pain escaped his lips, and it made him want to curl up on the ground. When he put a hand the wound, it came away wet with blood. It hurt like hell—but it wasn’t a serious injury.

“Haru!” Mary called his name, worried.

He knew it was silly to think so, but her concern made him a little happy.

“I’m fine!” he called back. “We’ve gotta take that sentry out!”

“I’ll go!” Shihoru said, making a dash for the sentry goblin.

Wait, what does she think she’s doing?! Haruhiro thought.

Apparently, Mary thought the same thing. “What’re you—!” she yelled, before

breaking off and running after her.

The sentry goblin, sword drawn from the sheath at its waist, noticed Shihoru's approach just as she finished her elemental glyph.

"Oom rel eckt vel dash!" she cried.

Voash! The frizzy black sphere shot out from the tip of the staff. But at that moment, Haruhiro realized something: although the [SHADOW ECHO] elemental wasn't as slow moving as [PHANTOM SLEEP]'s, it wasn't so fast as to be unavoidable. So with that fixed, avoidable velocity in mind, a caster could still make it harder for enemies to dodge by moving closer.

In other words, Shihoru took the risk of closing the distance between herself and the sentry to make sure her spell hit. And her gamble seemed to have paid off. The sentry goblin made a choking sound as the shadow struck it in the face, and its entire body started to tremble uncontrollably.

Yume stepped forward, kukri already flashing. "[CROSS CUT]!"

[CROSS CUT]'s half slashing, half smashing attack stripped the buckler entirely off of the sentry goblin's left arm and left a deep wound on its right. Even after the sentry goblin recovered from [SHADOW ECHO], it would no longer handle its sword properly.

Yume did what they needed most right now; she pressed the attack. Without stopping to catch her breath, she kept advancing on the sentry. This made it easy for Haruhiro to get into position at its back. The light line didn't appear, so he did the same as before.

The sentry goblin wailed as Haruhiro slammed and pulled and twisted his dagger into its back. Haruhiro wrapped his other arm around under its chin like before, and he kept going.

When the first sentry had finally stopped struggling, Haruhiro hadn't really felt anything in particular. But this time, sick started to rise from his stomach. Killing like this was cruel. Brutal. Though despite his nausea, he did not stop.

If we were switched, maybe you would kill me like this too. Sorry, but it goes both ways.

When the second sentry goblin had become still, Haruhiro felt terribly exhausted, and his wound hurt. But now wasn't the time to complain about things like that. Finally. The time had finally come. He gathered up his strength in the pit of his belly and threw it behind his voice.

"Just a little more!" he yelled, with all the strength he had. "I'll prove to you that we haven't come this far for nothing!"

But despite having said it, Haruhiro didn't know exactly what he meant to say. Prove themselves to who? Manato was no longer with them, after all. "Come this far?" But had they really come far at all, or did he just want to believe that?

He wished he could have said something cooler, more inspirational. He wanted to become someone who said cool and inspiring things. He didn't want it all to end for them here. He didn't necessarily want to do this whole Crimson Moon solider thing, either, but he wanted there to be a tomorrow for himself. He wanted to live.

He didn't want to die. At the very least, he didn't want to die.

Manato, wasn't it the same for you? You weren't completely satisfied with everything either. You too; you wished you could have been more, done more. Haruhiro and the others, they had been lucky to have survived this long.

We're not going to die. We're going to live, and keep moving forward. We're going to seize tomorrow with our bare hands.

For the sake of that tomorrow, they had to win here. They had to kill those two goblins.

"Focus on the hobgoblin!" Haruhiro cried, as he ran behind it.

Yume was attacking from the side while Mogzo brought two savage blows in succession on it, grunting with the effort. The hobgoblin deflected the first attack with its club, but the second tore into its left shoulder. Although his sword wasn't able to cut through its chainmail, the force of the blow still made the hobgoblin roar in pain. It had been wielding its club with both hands, but now, it was no longer able to.

"Keep attacking it!" Haruhiro said, but just as the words came out of his mouth,

the plate armored goblin broke through Ranta and came at Mogzo.

It put one foot down, hard, and brought its sword down in a diagonal swing. *No, way…* Haruhiro thought. The movement was almost exactly like Mogzo's [RAGE BLOW], except a goblin was doing it. Mogzo blocked it with his bastard sword, locking blades with it. The plate armored goblin made to continue its attack, but it was from this position that Mogzo did his job best.

He spun the plate armored goblin's sword around with his own, and in the same motion attacked with [SPIRAL SLASH]. The plate armored goblin leapt backwards immediately and, throwing a look behind, went after Ranta instead.

Ranta, taken completely by surprise, took a crushing blow to his bucket helm that sent him staggering. Faster than a speeding arrow, the plate armored goblin thrust, slashed upwards, then slashed downwards again in three quick strokes of its sword.

Ranta yelped. He couldn't do anything but back away. The flurry of attacks came so fast, he couldn't even use [PROPEL LEAP]. This was bad. Ranta was going to be overwhelmed.

"Oom rel eckt vel dash!"

Shihoru was the one who saved him, using [SHADOW ECHO]; the frizzy black elemental hit the plate armored goblin in the shoulder. It took the plate armored goblin mere moments to get its quivering body under control again, but it was enough to allow Ranta to retreat and catch his breath.

"Damn it! No one asked you to help!" Ranta spat angrily.

"Our trump card!" Haruhiro pressed his hand to the wound on his side.

He was having a hard time ignoring the pain and the resulting panic was making it hard to think clearly. He glanced at Shihoru and saw how haggard she looked. She must have been exhausted. She used the massively energy draining [PHANTOM SLEEP] twice at the beginning of the fight, and now [SHADOW ECHO] twice, too. How many more could she cast?

[PHANTOM SLEEP] wasn't a spell that was very effective on enemies who were vigilant and alert and [SHADOW ECHO] didn't seem effective enough to

be the deciding factor in this fight. That meant they only had one thing left. Their final ace-in-the-hole.

They had to finish things here and now with it. Before the fight could drag out any longer, they would finish off the hobgoblin.

Haruhiro screamed, “Mogzo, use it!”

Mogzo gave a grunt of acknowledgment, planted both feet firmly on the ground, and let out a long, ear-piercing howl that made all the hairs on Haruhiro’s skin stand on end. It was a Warrior’s [WAR CRY]. It unfailingly crushed the resolve of any enemy nearby that wasn’t expecting it; not really by surprising them, but by instilling fear in them.

And that’s exactly what happened to the hobgoblin. Its entire body went rigid, as if paralyzed by fear. It would regain its senses soon, but that one-second or even fractional-second opening was utterly invaluable to Haruhiro and the others.

Yume brought her kukri hard across the hobgoblin’s waist. “[SWEEPING SLASH]!”

Mogzo took a step back. “THANK…” he began, then stepped in again, but this time throwing all of his body weight behind a single, dreadful stroke. “… YOUUUUUUUU!”

With a sickening crunch, Mogzo’s bastard sword crushed deep into the hobgoblin’s shoulder, probably smashing through its collarbone. It made a half gurgle, half groaning noise, and went down on one knee momentarily. It immediately made to stand up again.

Haruhiro didn’t intend to get careless. As long as he was alive, he couldn’t afford carelessness.

“Take this!” he cried as he dropkicked it, foot connecting with the back of the hobgoblin’s head.

That put the hobgoblin in a daze once more, letting Mogzo rain blow after blow.

It wasn’t simple nor easy. When it did come, death came so readily, so lightly, and yet taking a life was neither simple nor easy. It was a slow, gruesome

process, and indeed Haruhiro was one of the participants in that process. So he had no right to look away, even if it was brutal and gory.

When the hobgoblin finally stopped moving, Mogzo dropped down on all fours, his armored back rising and falling as he raggedly sucked in air. That was definitely not just exhaustion; probably he was bruised and hurting all over, as well.

“H-h-hurry!” Ranta cried. “Hurry up and h-help me!”

Haruhiro looked over in Ranta’s direction and saw that Ranta was having trouble keeping his feet under him, stumbling backwards trying to parry the plate armored goblin’s attacks. Ranta was at his limits. No, probably already past his limits.

“Well done, Ranta! You’re amazing!” Haruhiro called.

“Hell yeah I am!” Ranta agreed. “You figured that out just now!?”

Haruhiro and Yume took up positions at the plate armored goblin’s left and right, intending to attack in a pincer formation. The plate armored goblin, however, swung its blade at Ranta one last time, then started to make a run for it. It ran, it ran, it kept running. Did it intend to flee?

No, that wasn’t it. The direction it was heading in. It was running straight at Shihoru.

Shihoru let out a little gasp, eyes going wide as she brought her staff up in front of herself. There was no way… there was no way the easily-intimidated Shihoru could fight off an attack. But there was no need for her to.

“Get back!” Mary commanded, stepping out in front of her.

Her slanted back stance put her parallel to the diagonal at which she held her staff. It was a Priest’s defensive skill: [GUARD STANCE]. The plate armored goblin swung its sword at her, and Mary looked as if she was going to either parry or block.

But she didn’t have a chance to do either. The plate armored goblin’s swing arched low, so low it struck the ground, but with enough force that it sent flying

hardened, compacted dirt flying. Mary shut her eyes to keep the dirt from getting in.

It was in that split-second.

In that split-second, the plate armored goblin leapt backwards and threw something using its other hand. A knife. It was a throwing knife.

Mary staggered, one hand pressed to her stomach. She had been hit. The throwing knife had lodged itself in deep.

“Mary!” Haruhiro cried.

No way… There was no way this could be happening. Manato. Mary was going to die like Manato did. No way. Without thinking, Haruhiro charged the plate armored goblin. He didn’t know what to do, he didn’t know what he was doing. Before he realized what he had done, he had come close enough to almost be face-to-face with it.

Its sword was coming right at him from the top left. It had purposely swung in a diagonal line so that Haruhiro couldn’t dodge to either side. What was he going to do? Keep rushing it. Reach it faster than its sword could reach him.

Maybe I’ll die, he thought. But he didn’t. Haruhiro fully front-tackled the plate armored goblin. He wasn’t dead yet. His face slammed painfully into its helmed head, but Haruhiro didn’t care. He wrestled it to the ground. The plate armored goblin was saying something, but it wasn’t in a human language so Haruhiro didn’t understand.

Its sword. He had to focus on its weapon. Haruhiro desperately held down the plate armored goblin’s right arm with his left; it punched him in the jaw with its free hand, and not just once, but again and again. Haruhiro’s head spun and it felt like his consciousness was going to fly off and away.

Don’t fly! Don’t fly away! Don’t fly, you’re not a birdie! he kept telling himself.

Haruhiro reversed his grip on his dagger.

The plate armored goblin seemed to scream something that sounded like *“Stop it! Stop it!”*

Yeah, right… like I'm gonna stop. Like it's even possible. Haruhiro thought.

The plate armored goblin's helm covered nearly the entirety of its head, except for the eye slit. It was there that Haruhiro aimed now, intending to ram his blade into its eye, but the plate armored goblin grabbed Haruhiro's dagger with its free hand, stopping it short of its target.

Both of their hands trembled on the dagger. A little bit more… Just a little more and his dagger would reach the slit. But that little bit was a great distance.

"Bastard! Damn it, damn it, damn it! Why the hell are you so strong?!" Haruhiro cursed it over and over.

"Haruhiro!" The voice belonged to Mogzo, and it was followed by the pounding of footsteps.

Mogzo was running towards him. Without looking to confirm, Haruhiro sprang off and away from the plate armored goblin. Mogzo let out a furious battle cry, and he lifted his bastard sword so high over his head, his body bent backwards. Then he brought his sword down sharply; as sharply as the release of a spring, coiled for far too long.

The resulting clashing sound was so heavy that reverberated down to the pit of Haruhiro's stomach, and Haruhiro wondered once more at Mogzo's strength. His bastard sword had sheared the plate armored goblin's head clean off its shoulders. It was, of course, fully and completely dead.

"We… did it?" Ranta whispered weakly.

Yume plopped herself to the ground. "Looks… like it…"

"I can't believe it," Shihoru said.

Mogzo lifted his sword up again, shouting the victory wildly skywards but he, too, couldn't really believe that they had done it either, so the shout was not nearly as ferocious as it could have been.

"…I'm sorry to interrupt," Mary said, raising her hand, "but can I heal myself now? It kind of, uh, hurts."

“Why’re you apologizing?” Haruhiro grinned, pressing a hand to his side and fighting hard not to groan.

Maybe it was better not to touch the wound, but even when he let his hand drop, it still throbbed painfully. It was getting hard to stay standing, so he finally allowed himself to crouch down.

“Mary…” he began. “It doesn’t have to be right now, but… It hurts like hell. Sorry, but can you heal me too?”

Chapter 22: Our Offering to You

I always wondered what I would say when the time came…

For some reason, it felt like they had been together for such a long time, yet it hadn’t been long at all. No, not long. One might say too short, really. Much too short.

I felt like I knew you… but I didn’t actually know you at all.

Haruhiro had once thought that Manato was nice, easy to approach, and smart. He was someone who could do anything and a leader worth following. A flawless person, perhaps. But only because Haruhiro hadn’t noticed any of his flaws. Or maybe it was because he kept his shortcomings well-hidden; but if their time together had been longer, perhaps Haruhiro would have gotten to see another side of him.

He wanted to know. Haruhiro wanted to get to know the real him. He wanted more time. If they had had more hours between them, then surely there would be more experiences, too. Maybe they would have gotten angry at each other, or gotten into fights. Maybe they would have grown to hate each other. Or maybe their friendship would have grown, instead.

One day, suddenly, Shihoru might have confessed her feelings. And what then?

Haruhiro didn’t want to believe that sentiments from the living failed to reach the dead. He didn’t want to think that all he said now was meaningless. But the more he thought about it, the tighter the knot in his chest grew.

When he closed his eyes, he saw an image of this friend from days since past. It was one of stillness; of being consumed by merciless—merciful?—flames. Of being rendered into nothing more than ashes and bone. It was the only image that came to mind, for Haruhiro was all too aware that Manato now lay under this headstone’s shadow, cast against the setting sun.

“We’ve become Crimson Moon members,” Haruhiro said, finally. To the gravestone where a crescent moon and a name was engraved, he held up an

emblem that resembled a silver coin.

Ranta, Mogzo, Yume, and Shihoru, too, showed their Crimson Moon emblems to the one no longer among them. Mary stood a little ways away, eyes lowered and hand against her chest.

“It didn’t actually take us this long to scrape up the money,” Haruhiro continued, tightening his grip on the emblem. “But we had some extra business that we decided to settle first.”

Ranta scoffed. “Actually, I didn’t care. It was you guys who decided that.”

“Stupid Ranta,” Yume said, and cuffed him on the arm. “Why do you always have to be such a Smart Alex at times like this-yan? It makes people hate you.”

“’Cause I’m awesome like that. I’m a Dread Knight, and I don’t give a damn what people think.”

“Um, Yume,” Shihoru lightly tugged Yume’s cloak. “It’s smart aleck, not Smart Alex…there’s no need to call him Alex…”

“Really?” Yume replied, bemused. “Yume always heard ‘Alex’…”

“E-err…” Mogzo interrupted, gazing at Shihoru. “Shouldn’t we get on with… you know?”

Shihoru stepped forward towards the gravestone and crouched. She reached into her pocket and pulled out an identical coin-like emblem. She hesitated a bit, then shifted to the stone’s engraved crescent moon, as if to wedge the coin in it.

“Wait, Shihoru, not there,” Haruhiro said quickly.

Shihoru turned back, face beet red. “S-sorry! Um, I wondered what would be a good place to place it, but…”

“Well, I mean, there is okay… but it probably won’t fit. The shape’s entirely different…”

“…Ah, r-right. You’re right. I-I’m sorry. I’m not just fat, I can be so empty-headed sometimes… How–how about here then?” Shihoru placed the emblem

on the ground next to the gravestone.

"…Manato," said Shihoru, "this is your contract. We bought it using the money you had left, and everyone pitched in the rest. Mary contributed, too. Please… take it."

If Manato could hear, perhaps he would have laughed and said, "You guys didn't have to do that, you know." Perhaps he would have said, "It's a waste of money, and you're better off using it to buy armor or weapons. Money has no use where I am now, but it does where you are." Maybe it would have sounded cool and collected, like he often did.

But no matter what he said to them, they wouldn't listen.

After all, we can't even hear you now, Manato. If you want us to listen to you, then say something we can hear… Let us hear your voice again…"

But Haruhiro knew that was impossible. And if they died, what would happen to them? Would they go to some sort of heaven? Would they meet Manato there? He didn't know. There was no way he could know. If they died… but Haruhiro didn't want to go as far as dying in order to talk to Manato again.

The rift between life and death was vast and deep, and cleft by a grand, swift river. Once that river was crossed, no matter what happened afterwards, there was no coming back. It was a complete and utter one-way trip.

There were no more tears. Yet Haruhiro did feel like lingering here for a bit longer, so he sat down in the grass and drew one knee up against his chest. Shihoru laid a hand on the gravestone, her shoulders trembling. Yume crouched down beside Shihoru, wrapped an arm around her, and gently stroked her head.

Ranta, both hands on his hips, was staring skywards. Mogzo inhaled deeply and slowly exhaled. Mary held her hair down against the wind, her gaze distant.

“We’ve really become a good team,” Haruhiro whispered; whispered to the friend who would never come back to them, whispered as he cast his eyes in the direction of the town. The bells were tolling the evening’s six o’clock hour.

Hovering just over the horizon was a half moon, crimson in color. *That’s right… why is the moon red here?*

…”Here”?

He turned towards the direction of the tower. The soaring tower that seemed to look down on all of them. The tower. That tower. There was something strange about it.

Haruhiro felt as if he had forgotten something. They had arrived here and joined Crimson Moon, but what about before that? Where had they been and what had they been doing? He didn’t know. He couldn’t remember. And it wasn’t just Haruhiro; it was the same for everyone else too.

Before they had realized it, they were here. Where was here? He recalled darkness. Darkness? But he couldn’t be certain. Where had that been?

The tower. That tower. It had something to do with that tower. But what? He didn’t know. He more he thought about it, the more confused he got. Whenever he reached his hand out to grasp it, it vanished.

Manato… What are we doing here? For what purpose?

This alone filled him with doubt. Even now, it didn’t look like the answers would come.

Chapter 23: Prologue

The bell tolled, sounding the evening's six o'clock hour. When the echoes of the seventh toll suffused and reluctantly faded into the city, night had fallen upon Altana. It was the final bell of the day, as the bells only sounded the time from six o'clock in the morning until six o'clock in the evening.

Though it was hardworking laborers who found it most useful, as their workdays began early in the morning and finished with dinner and a nightcap, many others used it too, as their signal to close up shop. Meanwhile, for food stalls it marked the busiest time of day, and for taverns it heralded the influx of patrons.

And for Sherry's Tavern, from the six o'clock bell until well into the night, they enjoyed their best business; large numbers of Crimson Moon members visited then, looking to replenish their spirits for work the next day.

Tonight, however, Sherry's was livelier than usual. Members of Crimson Moon were not the only ones present; elderly craftsmen, young apprentices, portly merchants, charming businesswomen, and even soldiers from the regular army could be found scattered about.

Everywhere Haruhiro looked was crammed full of people, and even the spacious second floor seemed cramped. And naturally, all the seats were taken, so many remained standing—not just on the first and second floors, but in the stairwell as well.

Everyone had packed themselves into Sherry's tonight after having heard a certain rumor.

Normally, a well-known Crimson Moon member would be referred to by the clan to which they belonged. That Man of Clan This or That Woman of Clan That. Though humans were the predominant race in Altana and the surrounding areas, the further one ventured from human territory, the more unfriendly races or monsters one could find in strength.

Often, they relied on their superior numbers to kill any humans they encountered. Therefore, clans were born out of necessity, and if the objective

was to achieve certain military goals, it was best to join one. In fact, it was perhaps more accurate to say that joining was a must; an indispensible measure.

Despite that, there existed a party that had fought clanless this entire time. Four of them were Crimson Moon members, and one was an elf. One of the Crimson Moons, Pingo, was a Necromancer, and counting Zenmai, the human construct he created, that brought their party up to six members.

They were considered the best of the best and their reputation in Altana always preceded them. They were the only Crimson Moon members ever to have been invited to a dinner party hosted by the Earl of Altana, Gerran Vedoy. They had even declined to attend.

“Souma, now is a good time, don’t you think?”

At the voluptuous woman’s urging, Souma rose from his seat. That alone caused a hush to fall over a tavern so boisterous only moments before. It was to be expected, of course. After all, everyone was here to listen to the announcement he was to make. What was the point if they did not hear him out in silence?

At any rate, today was a day for the history books. Today was the day that the famed Souma was, quite against expectations, going to form a clan. Rumor had it he came to recruit members.

But was the rumor true? Maybe it was nothing more than a groundless, false whispering. Many thought exactly that, but Souma *had*shown up for real at Sherry’s, and he was mere moments away from addressing everyone gathered.

“Shima,” Souma said.

“Yep,” the voluptuous woman gave him a slight smile and slight nod.

Souma then turned his attention to the man with dreadlocks. “Kemuri.”

“Here,” the dreadlock-man called Kemuri replied, lazily flexing his neck; left, then right.

Souma met the gaze of the child-like man. “Pingo.”

“Mmm…” Pingo’s gaze was on the ground and he let out a long sigh. “I dislike

things like this.”

“I see.” the corners of Souma’s mouth crinkled in the slightest of frowns before he turned to the construct and its fearsome mask. “Zenmai.”

Slowly, deliberately, Zenmai gave a single nod.

Souma’s eyes then went to the final member of his party, the elf. “Leelya.”

“Yes, Souma.” Leelya stared back with striking sapphire eyes.

Souma, closing his own, took a deep breath and mouthed one final name.

“Nino.”

She was neither here nor there, not any longer. She was once their Priest, and when they lost her, Kemuri changed his class from Warrior to Paladin; Shima left the Thieves Guild, went to the elves dwelling in the Forest of Shadow, and became a Shaman; Leelya joined them, too, around this time.

Ever since Nino’s death, Souma had been seeking a way to bring her back, but to this day had not yet found the means. He suspected that there were clues to be found at the resting place of the Deathless King, deep within what used to be the Kingdom of Ishmael, but no one really knew.

A means to bring back the dead might not even exist in this world. *This world.* What was this world anyway? Where had all of them come from, and how did they end up here? How could a ridiculous world where the moon shone crimson, where monsters were an ordinary part of life and beasts ran around as they pleased, ever be real?

Once upon a time, Kemuri had commented softly, “This is like something out of a video game…” and Souma had replied with, “Yes, yes it is.”

Or so they had thought at the time, but a short time afterwards, they no longer knew what they had been talking about. What was this thing called a “video game”? The feeling of unease had gradually faded and at times almost been forgotten, but it never completely left Souma. Even now it remained carved in his heart.

What if this world was not real, but some some sort of elaborate mimicry? Some sort of doppelganger? Then supposing that Souma and the others had come from the real world, what would have happened to the Nino who died in this world? Could it have be possible that Nino had simply returned to the real world? Could she be still alive?

It was a possibility, yes, and nothing more. Still, as long as the possibility existed…as long as it wasn't zero…

Souma opened his eyes. "We've decided to form a clan." Those words alone caused a stir throughout the tavern. "Our goal is to invade the former Ishmael Kingdom, the domain of the undead." Though he wasn't trying to speak loudly, his words carried through the entire room.

His voice alone was deep and menacing; easily intimidated monsters ran away with their tails between their legs. Monsters that could make a stand before Souma were indeed the strongest of the strong.

"We've obtained information that the Deathless King is showing signs of once again returning to deathlessness. We intend to investigate this further, and if the Deathless King has indeed returned, we will destroy him once more without hesitation. Of course, we don't expect it to be easy, but we must find a way. We need strength. Strength in numbers. Power beyond just the six of us."

All the Crimson Moon members in the tavern began speaking at once, while the civilians and other non-members applauded and whistled. The thunderous roar of clapping, cheering, and clamoring threatened to tear the very air apart.

But all Souma had said was a half-lie. Naturally, he would reveal his true motives to those deemed trustworthy, but in time.

"Please, lend us your strength!" Souma called. "Those who consider yourselves one of us, please join us!"

"Give us a name! What's the name of your clan?!" someone shouted.

Souma nodded. "From now on, we shall be known as the Daybreakers! Those who are valiant, those who are wise, those who are noble-hearted, and those who are dignified and resolute, join us! Do not fear death; defy it! We welcome all those who dare to seek life in its midst!"

In the wild whirlwind of excitement that erupted in the tavern, Souma inwardly whispered, “Nino…”

I will unravel the mysteries of this world, and then, perhaps one day, we shall meet again.…

Haruhiro could never have known how their destinies would cross, and what awaited them at the end.

Author’s Afterword

Dragon Quest, Wizardry, Final Fantasy, Megami Tensei, Metal Max, Romancing Saga, Breath of Fire, Live a Live, Chrono Trigger, Arc the Lad, Tactics Ogre, Gensou Suikoden, Tales of Phantasia, Wild Arms, Final Fantasy Tactics, Star Ocean, Mary’s Atelier (the Atelier series), *SaGa Frontier, Xenogears,* and other roleplaying games for home consoles have always been my saviors.

I’ve never been good at shooters, sports games, fighting games, or anything else action so I never really got into them, but roleplaying games were something that kept my attention. And though the single player aspect of advancing my character slowly but steadily wasn’t the only thing I liked, I do think that’s one of the most important aspects of the genre.

Even to this day, I’ve never been a person who has had very many friends. It might even be safe to say that I only have a few. Of course, that’s far from not having any friends at all, but I’m not really the type that can hang with crowds or get excited about something with other people. It’s something I would like to do, but I’m just not very good at it.

The first Dragon Quest and Final Fantasy games came out when I was a kid. Everyone was playing them and my schoolmates used to ask each other every day, “How far did you guys get?” or “What level are you guys now?” I couldn’t ever really participate in those conversations. What I could do, though, was sacrifice my sleeping hours to play, making sure that I was further along in the game than everyone else.

When someone bragged, “I got to that one place!” I would say inwardly to myself, “You’re only up to there? That’s nothing. I’m way further than you,” and smile secretly. In other words, I was quite the anti-social dork. But for that kind of person to become the hero of some story, to go on a grand adventure with all the good and bad, to become strong and save the world…. Roleplaying games really saved me.

Then, for solitary and reclusive gamers like us, there came a turning point: Online RPGs. *Diablo, Ultima Online, EverQuest, Dark Age of Camelot…* Those were all American games, but in Japan too, there was *Dark Eyes* and *Life Storm*.

Through the internet, we could team up with whoever from wherever and play together.

Of course, the idea of joining up with someone to roleplay already existed in tabletop RPGs, but for someone like me who wasn't good at getting along with people, the barrier to entry was too high. But with online games, there was no need to actually meet them. I could even play with people outside of Japan if I knew a couple of English phrases.

I became completely mesmerized. Of course the internet playing environment wasn't as highly developed as it is today. No optic fiber connections, no ADSL… everything was dial-up, so whenever I played, no phone calls could come in.

"Unlimited Talk Time" was from late night to early morning, when you can call certain numbers and talk as long as you want for a flat fee. I used every second of that time to play online. There were even times when I accidently kept playing way after Unlimited Talk Time ended, and my phone bill at the end of the month would be some phenomenal sum.

During that time, online RPGs were my reality. Other times, like times for sleeping or eating, I used solely to think about games. I would dive into the blood-rushing, heart-pounding world of online RPGs every night and return to the mundane humdrum of the real world in the morning. I lived in the world of games and games kept me alive.

On occasion, I'm asked why I became an author and I have to admit that games are a big part of the reason. If I had never came across roleplaying games, I definitely would have never become an author. In particular, if there wasn't that period in my life where I was engrossed in online RPGs, my debut work *Bara no Maria* (Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko) would have ever been written. The same goes for this novel.

Also, if I hadn't read Mizuno Ryo's work *Lodoss Shima no Senki* (Record of Lodoss War) and Matsuyama Benny's *Tonari Awase Hai to Seishun*, even if I had become an author, I probably wouldn't have been able to write this type of novel. The title of *Hai to Gensou no Grimgal* takes its inspiration from *Tonari Awase Hai to Seishun* and the title for early drafts of *Bara no Maria* was *Bara no Maria Senki*.

I’ve come this far guided by my imaginings—or perhaps wild fantasies—of roleplaying games, including online RPGs, and light novels based on them. It’s been a long, long road through many, many RPGs, and I no longer have the passion for playing that I used to. But even so, it always makes me excited when I come across games that bring the old memories back.

I wrote this novel ruminating about my time with roleplaying games, and I believe without a doubt that on the other side a yet unknown world awaits. If I continue to have the opportunity, I would like to keep writing novels that harken back to those times.

I would like to thank from the bottom of my heart, my editor K-san for the chance to write this novel, Shirai Eiri for the translucent, airy, modern, cute, cool, and wonderful illustrations, the designer-san who turned this novel into a perfect book, the publisher, all the distributors and people involved in the distribution process, and now all the readers who hold this book in their hands.

With much love and the hope that we will meet again, I place my pen down for today.

– Jyumonji Ao

APPENDIX

geography

[Grimgal]

The name of this world. No one knows if Grimgal is a continent, an island, the whole world of just a part of it. For practical purposes, the inhabitants refer to the world by this name. In general, Grimgal includes the Sky Dragon Mountains, the Mainland to the south, and the Frontier in the north.

[Aravakia Kingdom]

The only (mainly) human kingdom (though smaller human city-states and territories exist). Once, the lands now considered the Frontier stood at the apex of prosperity; however, when humans were defeated by the Deathless King and his confederation of kings, they retreated and consolidated their strength south of the Tenryuu Mountains. From then on, the north became the Frontier and the south became the Mainland.

[Fortress City Altana]

The only defensive position the Aravakia Kingdom maintains in the Frontier. The city where it all starts. Located in Altana is a variety of inns, taverns, weapon and armor shops, guilds, etc. The city is governed by Garran Vedoy and General Lasentora is the commander of the regular army. Altana maintains its stronghold position through a series of alliances with the elves of the Forest of Shadow, the dwarves of the Iron Mountains, and the centaurs of the Swiftwind Plains. All other races, of which there are a large number, are considered enemies.

setting

[Classes]

Warrior	Mage	Thief	Priest
Hunter	Paladin	Dread Knight	

* Other specialized classes such a Knight, etc. also exist.

[Skills and Magic]

The basics of skills and magic spells can be learned; however, this is no more than a theoretical understanding of their applications. The user does not have the ability to use them appropriately or obtain any real results until practicing and, above all, use them in a real fight (which is ten times more effective than practicing). Little by little and only after acquiring much practice will the user be able to use the skill or spell effectively. Mastering of a skill takes both time and effort.

[Clan]

For the most part, clans are formed by Crimson Moon parties who possess the same goal or objective. Members of the a guild are considered friends or comrades. Multiple parties cooperating with each other is required for large undertakings such as an assault on a fort or labyrinth, which is simply not feasible for a single party. Those who form clans are usually those who have such an objective in mind. Although the reserve force does not require it by regulation, registering a clan with the Crimson Moon headquarters upon its formation is recommended.

[Guild]

Various guilds operate in this world. Most are for specialized professions and through mutual agreement, a person can only be a member of one guild. In most cases, guilds have of policy of members mutually protecting their own, and although not placed in writing, all members are informed verbally. Any who break this rule are expelled from the guild and those who have been expelled may never rejoin. In the case of some guilds, the penalty does not end with simple expulsion, but the guild will send pursuers to kill the ex-member.

[Bestiary]

Goblin

Small, ugly humanoids. Typically around four feet in height, though some can be as tall as four and a half feet. They have yellowish-green skin, pointed ears, and although intelligence varies amongst individuals, they are smart enough to avoid disadvantageous fights. They prefer moving in groups and ruling power is determined by bloodline. A short gestation period of three months, high birth rate, and fast maturity to adulthood leads to a very large population. They have a habit of carrying all their valuables in a bag, called a goblin pouch, slung across their shoulders. Higher-ranked goblins possess decorated pouches, which in of themselves can be sold athigh prices. Although risky to fight, high-ranking goblins are also quite fashion conscious (for a goblin) and possess on their persons items of high value.

Hobgoblin

A goblin sub-species but not as numerous as goblins. Although they are similar to goblins, they are around the same height as humans. They are dim-witted, brutish, and bullied by goblins for their tall stature. Some are taken by goblins to be domesticated and used slave-soldiers. The more intelligent portions of their race are organized in a tribal society and they consider goblins to be enemies. Hobgoblins who's personalities are both meekly obedient and viciously savage are used as bodyguards. Most high-ranking goblins are protected by these types of hobgoblins.

Pit Rats

Rats the size of cats, agile, shrewd, and covered in very hard fur. Similar to porcupines, numerous sub-species. They tend to curl themselves up into tight balls and roll when fleeing. They are omnivores, but prefer meat. When in packs, some might even attack larger animals (humans included). Not very tasty as food and their pelts are not worth much. Considered vermins.

Undead

The general term for all types of undead, a new species brought into existence by the Deathless King. Technically, skeletons, zombies, ghosts are not undead and indeed, some still view them as human. Undead are those who have died but are not dead. They are living creatures that don't decay and possess a very powerful ability to regenerate. The only way to kill them is either destroying their brains or using fire to burn them to ash. It is said that the undead are made by infusing the black blood of the Deathless King with a corpse, however, undead priests and bishops may perform the Rite of the Undying to bring corpses back to life. The undead loses the majority of their memories of when they were alive and subsequently swears allegiance to the Deathless King. And even now after the Deathless King is no more, this has remain unchanged.

Zombie

Due to the "Curse of the Deathless King", the bodies of those who die become "Servants of the Deathless King" if not buried properly. Zombies are servants who's flesh has not yet completely rotted off. Once the soft flesh of a zombie is gone, they become skeletons. Severing the head or destroying the brain or heart of a zombie or skeleton may prevent it from moving for a while, but if left at that, they will eventually become skeleton parts or ghosts.